

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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JUNE



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• **COFFINS FREE !**

by ART LAWSON

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• **TALL, TOUGH AN' TEXAN**

by MORGAN LEWIS

• **GUN WAIF OF THE
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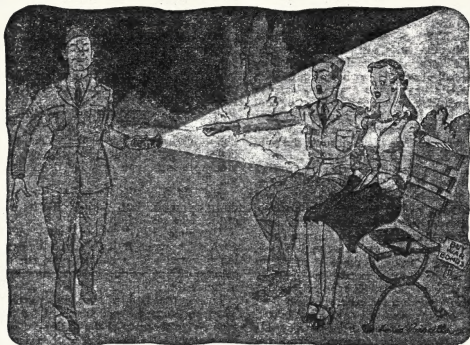
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Judgment Day for a Gun King

THAT Jay fellow had them all guessing. He kept his mouth shut, firmly locked on his past. Some folks allowed there was a heap of hellfire banked in that past. Others didn't know. The tough, battle-wise range country waited to see what the future would tell. For Jay Webb was between two rival cow camps, not taking the side of either—until that cleanup day of the beef drag.

Jay, a little rancher from Jawbone Creek, knew that the odds were ten to one that the wild Varney clan would be gobbled up by the all-powerful Cowboot outfit. On that fateful day of the drag the Varneys were greatly out-numbered by the Cowboot riders, who had been running the beef gather to suit themselves and had been doing their devilish best to crowd the wild Varneys into a sixgun ruckus. . . .

The tough, trouble-hunting ramrod of the Cowboot was dead set on starting something when he shook out his loop and headed for a plainly branded Varney cow. The ramrod heeled the animal and busted it in its tracks, spilling it hoofs over horns in a fall that usually meant a crippled cow.

Big Flint Varney of the wild mountain clan had never been noted for patience. His dark eyes burned like holes punched in a blanket with a hot iron. He had been at the breaking point all day. That busted cow was the last straw. Flint Varney, his handsome face ashen, spurred across the cutting grounds toward the trouble-hunting Cowboot ramrod.

Showdown! The Cowboot riders instantly backed clear of dust so that they could see to shoot. Old Bide Varney and Royal, Flint's younger brother, left the cattle they had been guarding and headed for the scene of action to back up Flint's play.

There was a weary and cynical glint in Jay Webb's eyes, a worldly-wise twist to his mouth as though he had watched this pattern of violence many times in the past.

Flint Varney, his attention fixed on the Cowboot ramrod, spurred past Jay. And at the exact instant Jay nicked his own horse with his rowells, startling the animal into lunging ahead into a collision with the angry man's horse.

The impact threw big Flint's animal off balance. Taken by surprise, Flint lost a stirrup. His cowhorse instantly kettled, completing the job of unloading him.

Flint Varney landed on his feet with the agility of a panther. He whirled, his seething fury diverted upon this new tormenter. His six-shooter was out of the leather with furious speed.

Then, because Jay was unarmed, Flint lowered the gun. Contempt showed through the hot rage in his powerful face. Because Jay had made a point of minding his own business the Varneys had taken it for granted he wouldn't take sides in this affair.

"So you're joinin' the pack too, now that the other dogs have treed the bear," the big, black-haired man spat. "You didn't have the guts to declare yourself until you were sure you was on the winning side."

Jay slid from his horse. "Let's put it down as an accident, Varney, and let it go at that," he said mildly.

"Accident, hell!" Flint Varney swung a whistling punch at Jay's jaw. He missed, but followed with a hooked uppercut that glanced off Jay's chin. He kept moving in to finish the job.

Jay met that rush without giving ground. Then he drove a short punch of his own squarely to the base of the dark-eyed cowboy's jaw. He followed it with a terrific left to the heart.

Flint Varney reeled back, a queer astonishment in his face. His knees buckled suddenly, and he fell forward on his face in the dust. He had been knocked cold. . . .

Jay knew that by saving Flint Varney from the eager guns of the Cowboot butchers, he had turned the wild Varney clan against him—as well as the Cowboot who had been cheated of their gun fodder.

Only Cliff Farrel, that gifted Western writer, can tell a dramatic, trigger-tempered story like this. He will tell it in the next issue in his vivid, cow-country novel—"Hell Wouldn't Have Him!" July 10 STORY WESTERN—published June 9th!

The Editor.



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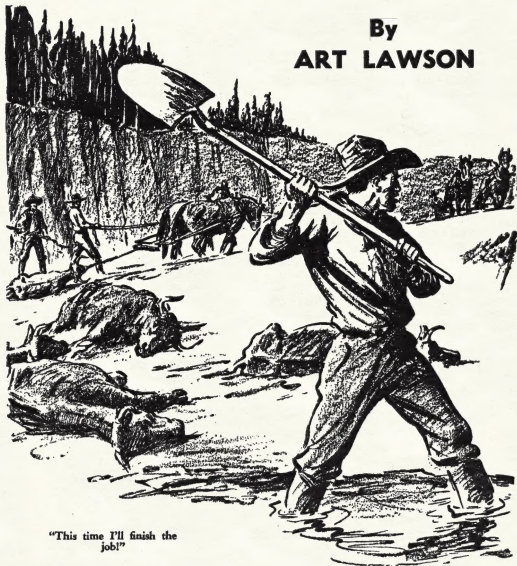
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Dramatic, Action-Packed Novel

By
ART LAWSON



"This time I'll finish the
job!"



Bitter enemies, Jack Boyden and Slim Lederle worked side by side to save the blizzard-blasted Muleshoe spread—both knowing that only one of them would return alive!

COFFINS FREE!



Jack reined up and
faced Slim. . .

CHAPTER ONE

Treachery Trail

JACK BOYDEN was not prepared for a blizzard. It had been a warm, late winter day when he left the little cross-roads town of Behive City in search of the Muleshoe ranch where he was assured he could get a job. Now, only a couple of hours on the way, the precipitous dropping of temperature already bit through his thin

jacket and worn levis. Then the wind hit him like something solid. It came across the prairie with nothing to stop it for six hundred miles and it struck him with the impact of a thousand fists.

In minutes the horizon was black; the prairie gradually being swallowed up in the advancing storm. Almost from the first the tiny ice particles of a blue norther knifed at his face like bits of glass from a battery of cannon. His horse did not like it and took to shying off the trail, fighting Jack, trying to make him turn tail to the storm like the cattle drifting slowly by. The horse began to buck like crazy; and from then on it was a constant battle between man and beast and blizzard.

Jack reckoned his chances of surviving this blue norther in a strange country were about a thousand to one against him. Yet there was neither bitterness in him, nor anger against a fate that seemed always to steer him up the wrong trails or throw him against unendurable situations. His string of mean luck had gone on so long it had toughened him. It had injured him. Jack simply accepted what came his way and did the best he could with it.

Finally he had to get down from the saddle to drag the horse's head around into the gale again and go on afoot. He had drawn his bandanna around against his mouth and nose to protect his lungs against the driving ice. He pulled his Stetson down low over forehead. Slouching ahead, he drove himself into the storm, steering by the whistle of wind that he balanced between his ears, struggling into the almost impenetrable wall ahead with closed eyes.

This was his only chance, to go into the storm. The barkeeper in Behive City's American House had told him to head straight north until he struck a plow furrow across the prairie, and then to turn west. It would be eighteen to twenty miles to the furrow that was a county boundary line marked out by a surveyor last fall, and anywhere from one to five miles west depending on how direct Jack's northern bearing turned out to be.

You could not miss the Muleshoe, this hombre had promised. Like a city in itself. Corrals, windmills, bunkhouses, blacksmith shop. They even had a commissary that was opened on Saturdays in the vain hope that it would keep the boys home over the weekend.

Thinking of this brought a grin to Jack's stiff lips. He wished that barkeeper had come along with him now to tell him he could not miss the Muleshoe.

Then he stumbled. He fell to his knees in the gritty snow. The horse stopped immediately, head low. It seemed to take forever for Jack to struggle to his feet. He took a step and stumbled again. This time he felt as if he had been knocked down with a club. The cold had gotten to him so the skin of the front of his legs seemed to be dry and brittle; it seemed to be cracking up like a snake's skin when it is shedding. Jack was not at all sure that he could get up again. He was not certain that he wished to.

Slowly he realized what had happened. He had fallen into that furrow. This helped him get up. With the wind at his right side now he had a tendency to drift south. Constantly he had to keep coming back to that furrow. It was like tacking in a small boat against a northeaster.

"Yuh can't miss it," the barkeeper had said. "Like a little town—"

Jack was beginning to feel silly and irresponsible as the cold got to him. He knew he was freezing to death. Ice no longer cut him so he noticed it. His cold, crackled skin felt warm. His mind had a tendency to wander off and laugh at him. It went away and came back, and one of the times it returned it told Jack that he had finally come to some sort of shelter.

He straightened up. Inches from his face a square window glowed with light. He could see through it where somebody had rubbed away the frost. He saw a stove in there red as a cherry. He saw a couple cowboys sitting on bunks. They were both old-timers. One was twanging a guitar. The other was plaiting a horsehair bridle.

Jack was sure he had gone crazy.

He lifted a hand to tap on the window. His knees sagged. He clutched for support. The window vanished. . . .

THE place was warm. It smelled of fire and coffee and bacon and men. It was a strong, full smell. It smelled of horsesweat and rawhide and neatsfoot oil. It smelled of tobacco and Mexican corn-shuck cigarettes.

Jack fought eyes that refused to open.

"He's coming to," someone said.

Jack's eyes opened now and he was looking straight into the pale blue eyes of an old man who badly needed a shave. It hurt Jack when he grinned at the man.

"Muleshoe?" Jack asked.

The oldster nodded. "Picked you up last night," he said, "tappin' on the window like a crow. Fetched in your hoss, too. Was just down to the stable. Yore ole crowbait's doin' fine."

Jack said. "Thanks, friend."

He felt tired to the guts. But he had arrived. His horse was okay. This old cowboy was the one he had seen last night plaiting the horsehair bridle. He had reached the Muleshoe where the barkeeper had assured him he could easily get a job.

Jack sat up in the bunk. Somebody had taken off his boots and his jacket and had loosened the top button on his levis. They had hung his holstered pistol over the foot of the bunk. Jack saw that the gun had been cleaned and oiled.

"Damn it," Jack said, too full to again thank the old-timer. His face stung as if he had pushed over a red ants' nest with it. His bones ached and his legs felt as if they had been scalded. But Jack felt fine. He put out a hand to this oldster. "Name of Boyden," he said. "Jack Boyden."

"Hank O'Keefe." The oldster shook with him.

"Glad to know you."

"Likewise."

They did not have much to say after that. Jack sat on the bunk looking about him. Hank had brought in his saddle and rubbed it down with oil. He had taken some polish to the silver inlay.

"Like bein' fitted up for a funeral," Jack laughed. "You sure worked hard—shinin' up all my stuff."

"Ain't nothin'," Hank said. He poked at the stove.

Outside the wind still screamed. There was a blue light in the window through which Jack had looked last night. For the first time he realized that it was daylight. He must have slept ten-twelve hours at least. It had seemed like nothing. But Hank could not have shined up everything in only a couple minutes.

"What time is it?" Jack asked.

"Gettin' on to noon," Hank said.

Jack swung his legs from under the blanket. Barefooted he tried a step. He marveled that he could walk. He breathed deeply to stretch the beaten muscles of his chest. He flexed his arms. He was grinning with pleasure when someone knocked on the door and opened it to Hank's "Come in." Vacuum from the lee of the building sucked smoke from the stove in one dark puff. Then the door clicked shut and Jack twisted his head about to see who had come in.

The cowboy's eyes dilated. He was immediately embarrassed at being barefooted, at having the tails of his shirt out, at needing a shave. Their visitor was a girl. Her cheeks were red from the cold. Her lips were crimson and her nose pink. But her eyes were black when she laughed.

"What's the matter with him, Hank? He freeze in that position last night?"

"Reckon," the oldster said.

Jack dropped his arms. Color burned his face.

"Mornin' Miss," he said.

"I'm Nell Bishop." She went directly to the point. "I own the Muleshoe. What're you doing in this country?"

Jack had never before met anyone like her. The barkeeper in Behive City had not prepared him for this.

"Feller in the American House said you'd have a job for me," he said.

The girl looked him over much as she might have examined a steer she was thinking of buying. She saw that he was six feet of whalebone and rawhide. His eyes were blue, the corners crinkled from looking off over endless plains. His hands were rope burned and the seat of his pants had been shined by his saddle.

"Can you peel the rough string?" she asked.

"I can ride anything," he said.

The girl laughed. It was sudden as the waves in a mountain pool when a trout has jumped. "You can ride anything!" she said. "Where did I hear that before? We'll see, cowboy." She put out a hand and he shook with her. Though the hand was small her grip was strong, straightforward. "Forty a month, beans and bullets—begin as soon as you feel like it. Your pay starts when you do."

She dropped his hand and wheeled away.

"Show him around, Hank," she said to the old-timer.

Jack tried to remember what the girl looked like and for the life of him he could not reconstruct her at all in his mind. He could not even remember how she had been dressed when she came into the bunkhouse. All he could picture was the partly hidden fire behind black eyes—a generous mouth—a firm handshake.

Forty a month, beans—and bullets.

"What're the bullets for?" Jack asked Hank O'Keefe.

The old-timer was showing him around. The gale had abated somewhat. They kicked through drifts between the ranch's buildings. "Just in case," Hank said.

They came to a long, low shelter. This was a lean-to roof with a wall against the low northern side. The south side was open.

The shelter was crowded with cows and small calves. A steer was trying to nose its way in and Hank drove it off.

"Scat—you lump o' meat!" he scolded. "Ain't got no manners."

"Ain't got no more manners than my arm," Jack agreed.

He slapped the steer's rump and watched him go skiooting into the snow. Then they went on. They passed a horse corral that Hank said held the quiet ones. They came to another. One side of this was a shed like the one in which the cows were crowded. The horses were solid in it.

"These are your playmates," Hank said.

The horses ignored the cowboys. Jack went after one, a big black hammerhead, and the beast turned on him, trying to bite him, ugly and mean and ornery.

"He's about the most peaceable of the lot," Hank said. "Wait'll you toss a leg over some of 'em."

"Beginnin' tomorrow," Jack said.

This was good. Jack felt that this was very fine indeed. He was still stiff and weak, but by tomorrow he would be more than ready to give these rough horses a working. One thing Jack had no doubt about was his ability to handle anything on four hoofs.

He turned to the bunkhouse, following Hank. Wind had died out now except for an occasional flurry that raised a little cloud of snow to whirl around in a dance. He could see the whole Muleshoe—the low, snug main house—the half dozen bunkhouses, most of them small, an unusual arrangement in this country—the cookshack where the men went to eat.

Yeah, Jack thought, this was the place where he would beat his bad luck. This was the spread for him.

He went on through the keen air savoring the feeling of peace within himself. As they approached their bunkhouse the cook appeared at his door banging on the triangle. Jack and Hank changed their course to take them to the cook-shack. Inside they slucked heavy coats and stamped feet free of snow. Most of the men were out today hunting strays, searching for calving cows and steers that had become bogged down in the drifts. Only a couple men were at the long table.

The two cowboys went up to them. Hank started to introduce.

"Slim—this is the new peeler—"

The man named Slim got up. He held a hand for Jack Boyden. Slim's lips twitched and he withdrew his hand before Jack had raised his. Slim had become as pale as the drifts outside.

Jack stared at him. Long ago he had sworn to kill Slim Lederle on sight—and here he was.

"Evenin'—Slim,"—Jack said—"or did you change your name when you got down here?"

"I didn't change my name," Slim said. Slim edged him down the cook-shack away from the other men. Lips tight across shining teeth he asked: "You came looking for me?"

"Not exactly," Jack shook his head. "But now that we're both here, Slim, what are you going to do about—"

"This!" Slim Lederle said.

He lifted a fist from the floor. It was a treacherous move. It caught Jack absolutely flat-footed.

CHAPTER TWO

"Quit—Or Fight!"

JACK tried to dance away. He collided with Hank O'Keefe who was standing there dumfounded by this sudden violence. The ramrod's fist skinned along the point of Jack's jaw and stopped short of his ear. It staggered him and drove him back against the table on which the cook was just setting a great bowl of stew. The cook swore loudly.

Jack regained his balance. Slim Lederle was boring in, smashing at him, short hard punches to the face and stomach. With his back to this heavy table and knees bent over a bench Jack could not put up effective resistance. He grappled blindly for Slim, kneeling him until he drew back. Free of the bench Jack released the foreman. For a moment the two men stood on spread feet, staring, breathing shallowly.

The cook was shouting at them above the ruckus:

"Pelados! Keep away from the slum!"

They did not hear him. They had ears and eyes only for themselves. They were each intent on searching for a fatal opening in the other's defense.

Jack had taken a terrible beating in the

first unexpected onslaught. This had weakened him. Added to the weariness following his struggle with the storm he felt completely incapable of putting up an attack or even making a fair defense. He felt half asleep on his feet, paralyzed, alone and at Slim's mercy.

Then Slim bored in. Jack parried the blow. He got in a couple of good ones himself, to the pit of Slim's stomach, doubling up the man, bringing a grunt from deep within him. He followed with a swing to the jaw that missed, and he put so much power behind it the weight of his arm drew him sidewise to Slim. Slim was quick to take advantage of it. He chopped down straight for Jack's ear; he slammed in another fist to Jack's nose. He spun the cowboy around, then tripped him, hammered him down to the floor and kicked him in the ribs.

Jack hardly felt this. He got to his hands and knees and was kicked flat again. Jack lay on the dusty floor with his face to a crack between the rough boards. He could not move at all now. He could only lie there and take it. He could not even feel the final kick of a sharp heel that cracked a rib.

It was like observing something from another world.

"Take him out. If he can't sit his horse, tie him on it. Get rid of him. If he stays here—he'll get a free coffin."

Slim Lederle's voice, that was.

There was a great laughter and roaring in his ears. He learned that he was being moved when cold air slapped his hot face. Hank O'Keefe was on one side, an arm around his waist. Another cowboy supported his other side.

Jack heard Hank say: "Somebody'll kill Slim someday."

The other cowboy said: "This hombre's comin' to, Hank."

"How you feel, Jack?" Hank asked.

Jack had no feelings at all except for the cool breeze against his skin. He was numb in every muscle. Yet he found a grin somewhere.

"Finer'n frawg's hair," he said.

Precariously Jack balanced himself on the edge of his bunk trying to keep down the nausea that tugged at him. Bitterly he thought of the Slim Lederle feud that had dogged him through so many weary lost miles of wandering.

He and Slim had been pardners in a tight little horse ranch up Wyoming way. They had been doing so well with it they went to town one night to celebrate. Unfortunately they ran into a fight with a tinhorn and almost killed him. The battle ended with Jack in jail, the gambling man in a hospital where the doc expected he would die, and Slim hiding out in the badlands.

But the tinhorn had lived. On condition that Jack pay specific damages they had let him out of jail just in time to discover that all his stock had vanished and his pardner had disappeared. The rest of the spread was swallowed up by the gambler's claims.

That was when Jack swore he would kill Slim for deserting him and running away with the horses. He had passed the news up and down the trail. He had followed Slim from hell to breakfast until he had finally completely lost him. Now chance had brought them together for the first time—and the chore had yet to be done.

Old Hank O'Keefe broke into Jack's reverie.

"Feelin' better?"

"Nah!" Jack said. "Worse."

THE bunkhouse door swung open. Slim Lederle came in. He left the door open and stood on the threshold. He kept his hands close to holstered guns. "One of the boys just come in," he said in clipped tones. "He's been ridin' line down along Comanche Wash. Says the cows have been driftin' in there until they're stacked up like cordwood. Four-five hundred of them. See if you can get up a crew for me, Hank. We're goin' down there to drag them cows out."

The old-timer shrugged into his coat and left with decided misgivings. Jack watched Slim standing there. He kept his line of vision on Slim's belt buckle.

"You're driftin'," Slim said slowly. "And quit followin' me. There's no two ways about it, Jack. I got a good lay here and I'm keepin' it. You bothered me enough. Next time I see you I'll kill you."

"What's the matter with now?" Jack asked softly.

"When I kill you," Slim said, "I'll have plenty of witnesses to say it was self-defense. I've grown up, Jackie-boy—even if you haven't."

He wheeled away, slamming the door. Through the fogged window Jack saw him

go down to the lean-to barns. Hank had located half a dozen men to go with Slim. They saddled up. They wrapped themselves in sheepskin coats and stuffed their boots into lined overshoes. They took along a couple spare horses apiece and headed south.

Soon the cook followed with a chuckbox lashed to the rear of his buckboard, indicating that Slim expected to be gone two or three days. The cook had hitched four big mules to the traces, figuring that they could haul him through any damn drift they might encounter. Then he whipped out of the yard, his mules kicking snow clods against the dashboard, his wheels spinning brightly in the white stuff.

Jack rolled over on the bunk. The pain in his ribs was a hot, live thing. He had been badly beaten. He told himself that he had not been given a fair chance, that the storm had licked him before Slim had treacherously attacked him. He bit his lip, trying to forget, trying to ease himself. Miraculously he fell asleep.

He woke at the sound of someone stamping on the bunkhouse floor. In a moment of strange panic Jack opened his eyes to recognize the girl. She was kicking snow from her small feet.

"I hear you're leaving," she said. "If you're broke we'll give you a little dinero to carry you a while. Come up to the house when you're ready to go."

"Uh—" Jack gulped a breath. He got off the bunk to stand before her. It hurt his cracked rib. The directness of the girl twisted up his thoughts in regard to Slim Lederle, then suddenly straightened them all out again. "Uh—you made a mistake, Miss," he said. "I'm not goin' anywhere. Fact is I thought I'd start work today. Why wait until tomorrow? Thought I'd—uh—go down to this Comanche Wash and help the boys unstack your herd."

"You think it wise?" The girl looked straight into his eyes. "I heard about Slim beating up on you. Men he beats up usually drift—if they aren't buried."

"An' coffins free, . . ."

Jack now found he could laugh. It showed no humor. "He got me when I wasn't looking. Next time it'll be a different story. I'm not driftin', Ma'am. I'm not beat up for keeps. I'm sticking it out right here."

The corner of the girl's curved mouth had a little quirk to it. Those jet eyes softened ever so slightly. "You knew him before you came here," she said.

"Sorta," Jack admitted.

"Afraid of him?"

"No, Ma'am," Jack said. "He's afraid of me, Ma'am."

"You'll do," the girl said suddenly. "You have a cut over your eye. You're standing like a man would who has a broken rib. Come over to the house and I'll fix you up with a couple pieces of sticking plaster."

She left then, and shortly afterwards old Hank O'Keefe came in. Jack had been waiting for him. Hank shed his heavy coat. He filled a pipe with tobacco and went over to the woodbox to hunt up a long splinter he could use as a match. Jack wanted to ask him what the girl had on her mind. Now that Hank was here it seemed like a foolish question.

"Jest us women, old men an' cripples around," Hank said. "Goin' to be lonesome again when you're gone."

"I ain't leaving," Jack said. "I—uh—got to go up to the house. Then I'm riding for Comanche Wash. This going to the house is orders."

Hank had found his splinter and was trying to light it from the stove. He was not being very successful. "Strictly orders," he said.

HEAVERY Mexican rugs were on the floor of the living room. Coal glowed in the fireplace. Deep chairs and a huge divan brought an ache to Jack's throat. This was the way to live—not in the bare bunk of a bunkhouse. A can could assemble his life around him in a place like this; just as some relative of Nell Bishop's had brought together the Comanche war bonnets and shields, the lances, the old guns and mounted buffalo and elk heads that adorned the walls. A man could really live here—if he had a woman.

Then she came in. He still could not remember what she looked like. The eyes and mouth were all he remembered. Now he saw her dark hair for the first time, blue-black with a curl to it. He saw she was smaller than he had thought she would be. In sweater and skirt and boots she was slimly curved. The body that had had no shape in its heavy coat was lovely and deli-

cate as some fine bit of Mexican silver work. The girl was so beautiful it hurt.

"Come over here," she ordered.

He went around the divan. On a small chair she had laid out some things, bandage, bottles, little pieces of wood and a box of cotton. She touched a match to the wick of a patented lamp that hung from the ceiling. When the flame took it shed a cone of light on Jack.

"Take off your shirt," she said, "and take off your undershirt. I had a father once, and I had an uncle. My uncle had hair on his chest, but Pa didn't. Besides—I studied nursing for a spell down at Austin. Don't ask me why."

Jack reacted slowly. He was not used to taking off his shirt and undershirt before a woman, even if she did have an uncle with hair on his chest. He made his protest.

"I'm okay, Ma'am. There's nothin' wrong with me that you can't fix with my shirt on."

"The last man got into a fight with Slim had four broken ribs. You have one, at least. I know all about these things. Off with the shirt, Cowboy."

There was no more argument. The girl was used to giving orders, Jack could see that. He was glad he had gotten a haircut and taken a bath with his last dollar in Beehive City. He was glad he had on a clean undershirt. But when he got to it, the singlet held back. He yanked. It came over his head with a little tearing feeling.

"Blood," the girl said.

She looked at his ribs. There was a dark, bruised spot on his left side below the heart. The blow had been so sharp it had cut the skin. It had started bleeding again, and there was a splotch of dark red on Jack's shirt.

"He did that with his heel," she said.

The bitterness in her voice was a shock to Jack. She had been so cool, so much in control of herself this evidence of emotion really astonished him. She seemed to expect an answer. She was looking up at him, her dark eyes suddenly gone soft and warm.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said.

"You haven't been eating very regular," she said.

"No, Ma'am," he answered.

She kept her eyes on him, steady. The



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tips of her fingers were lightly touching his bare chest near the spot where he had been kicked.

"I'm going to probe around—see if this rib is broken or just cracked. If you feel like fainting"—she smiled—"faint backwards. The divan's big and soft."

"I won't faint," Jack promised.

"Of course you won't," she said.

She probed at him gently. Involuntarily he sucked sudden breath. He bit his lips. A great dizziness hit him and he felt very weak. He laughed very loud. She had stopped touching him.

"You thought I'd faint," he said. "Say—uh—" He was sitting down. He had no memory of having done so, and the girl, standing between him and the glowing fireplace was laughing with him. "Say—" he gulped.

"That's likely to happen to anyone," she said. "You've been on short rations for a long time by the skinny look of you. You were nearly frozen to death in a blizzard. You were beaten up. What do you expect?" She poured a tumbler half full of whisky and watered it slightly. "Here—take this."

He drank it thankfully. It warmed him. It danced inside him and made his hurts seem like nothing. "What did you find out?" he asked.

"Cracked. I can tape it up, Cowboy. In a week you won't know you ever were hurt."

He did not faint again. He watched her work. He felt the deftness of her hands on him. Intently she went about her job, and her long dark hair fell forward to tickle his bare chest, and the scent of it was warm and sweet in his nostrils.

"You hate Slim," she said without looking up.

"That's right," he muttered.

"You'll have to fight him again if you stay around, and maybe a third time," she said softly. "If you want to leave I won't think badly of you."

"I'm staying," Jack said.

The girl finished with the bandage. She put some disinfectant on a patch and plastered it on the cut over his eye. He began to dress. He was slipping the shirt over his head when she said:

"I'm going to marry Slim Lederle. I'm engaged to him."

Jack tucked his shirttails into his pants. "I'm powerful sorry to hear that," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Back Trail of Hate

HANK got a sheep-lined coat from the commissary for Jack Boyden, and found him a pair of good warm mittens and some overshoes. It was too late now to go to Comanche Wash so Jack waited until morning. That night a couple men came in for more supplies, and a third rode up to tell of bad news along Longhorn Creek.

Like the Wash, the big bend of Longhorn had acted as a trench to pick up drifting cattle. Some had fallen through the ice and were drowned. Others had crossed over the bridge built of frozen bodies. There was hell to pay and worse all along the southern part of the Muleshoe range.

Jack left before dawn with a couple pack horses loaded with food. There had been a slight thaw the day before and the night's freeze had put a glare of ice over the prairie. His horses slipped and snorted until they became used to the treacherous footing. By then the dawn was velvet, the sun was gray-ing the sky, and Jack knew that the thaw today would be almost complete.

He remembered that saying about the weather in Boston. If you don't like it, wait a minute and it will change. Boston had nothing on this country. If you didn't like the weather here you didn't have to wait that minute. Sometimes you got two or three kinds of weather at once.

Now the sun shot its rays up in a great yellow fan to the east, gilding the rolling, snow-covered prairie. The horses got spirit from the daylight and increased their pace. The night's sleep had done Jack a lot of good. If it were not for the rib-knifing pain at every jog he would have felt wonderful today. Jack had not run away this time; he had not quit; he had bucked old lady Bad Luck and old man Fate; and if he had not won he, at least had not lost.

He thought of the girl and he did not like the thoughts. He had not known there could be anyone like her; strong and lovely; soft and clean. It was a horrible thing that she should marry Slim Lederle.

Well, he mused, that was no affair of his.

His business with Slim did not include Miss Nell Bishop.

He breathed of the clear, crisp air and, looking skyward, changed his direction slightly to head toward the dot-like circlings of buzzards in the sky. Already he could feel the warmth of the sun on his side. He knew that it had touched the ice below the golden sheen was now thrown up as if from a new mirror.

Gradually he swept under the wheeling black birds. He saw smoke ahead, spotted movement on the prairie; and soon he was in the temporary camp of the Muleshoe boys at Comanche Wash. He reined in beside the buckboard that carried the open chuckbox. The cook glanced up from his dutch ovens, weary to exhaustion. Recognizing Jack an odd apprehensive look came to his smoke-reddened eyes. Jack grinned at him.

"Got eatin' food aboard these horses," Jack said. "Where'll I unload them, friend?"

"Anywhere," the cook said. "But if you've got a spare cook in one of them bags drop him right over here."

"Sure wish I had," Jack said.

He dropped reins over his horse's head and got down. He tied the pack animals to the buckboard before slipping the squaw hitches holding on the baggage. He laid a tarpaulin on the snow and dumped the stuff on top of it.

"Got a couple bottles of old Monongahela," Jack said. "Miss Nell sent it. Says to give the boys a short snort or two come evening."

"Nell's a hundred percent," the cook said. That apprehension crossed his eyes again. "Ninety-nine percent, anyway. I don't mind tellin' you, Cowboy, I don't savy that other one percent of her I don't like. You put up a real fight." He managed a wisp of a smile. "Next time you better do your scrappin' someplace else—not around a bowl of my stew. I thought a couple of times you was goin' to land right in it, and the recipie didn't call for no treatment like that."

The cook had not said straight out what it was he did not like about Nell. Jack could guess it must be her promise to marry Slim. He was on the point of asking the cook if that was what he had been hinting about, then stopped himself.

"Know where Slim is?" Jack asked.

"You ain't going to start up—" The cook stared at him. He changed his tactics. "He's down in the wash, Cowboy. It was good knowin' you."

HE rode down the wash. The place was a shambles. Snow was still thirty feet deep in here. It had drifted for miles across the prairie to pile up on the trapped cattle. A lot of these beeves had died during the blizzard, and others had given up since. There was no counting how many had perished in the norther that had almost taken Jack Boyden's life as well.

Sweating cowboys were still digging them out. They had a couple of teams down there hitched to whiffletrees. When they found a steer in the drift they would run a logging chain around his horns and drag him out. If he still lived a cowboy would goad and kick him up the side of the wash to a place where bales of hay had been broken and spread on the prairie. A lot of these cattle, weak, sick and half suffocated would recover.

Slim Lederle was on foot taking his turn with a shovel when Jack found him. Slim was as red-eyed as the others. It gave him a curiously baleful appearance when he scowled up at Jack who remained in the saddle.

"I thought I told you to travel," Slim said.

"I'm not working for you," Jack said. "I'm working for Miss Nell Bishop. I'm taking my orders from her."

Slim stuck his shovel into the snow. He pushed back his Stetson from a brow damp with sweat. "Notice she patched up your face for you," Slim said after a moment. His eyes blackened. "Some fellers never learn, do they, Jack? So you're working for her, are you? You're letting her take you into her parlor to try out her nursing, huh? You're taking orders from Nell?" Slim shrugged. His mouth quirked up at the corner. "What are these orders?"

"She sent me down with grub," Jack said evenly. "I delivered it to the cook. One of the boys came up from the big bend of Longhorn Creek, wherever that is. He says there's another jam down there. Miss Nell reckoned you'd be interested in knowing about it."

"They ask for help?"

"No."

"Then supposin' you go right back and tell Nell thanks," Slim said. "And if I was you—I'd tell her good-by at the same time."

"Don't reckon I'll do the farewell just yet," Jack said shortly.

"Then I guess I'll have to beat you up again," Slim said. "This time I'll finish the job." He was holding his shovel as if he would bash Jack with it. For one of those moments that knows no time they faced each other. Slim's face was hard and cold as the ice underfoot.

Jack's lips were motionless when he spoke. "I'm waitin'."

Slim stared at him, then lowered his shovel and returned to the drift. Slim was not backing out of the fight. Slim was only putting first things first. Personal feuds follow in important duty to the outfit.

Jack knew this was the situation as he turned his horse up to the cavy and set him loose in charge of the kid wrangler. That rib was still goading him. The sensible thing for him to do would be to return to the Muleshoe and go to bed. But he could not do that while there were still live steers and cows buried in the wash. Besides he wanted to be around when this job was finished and and he and Slim would be free agents.

He relieved a cowboy on one of the teams. This was work he could do. It had the added advantage of being at the opposite end of the drift from Slim where Jack could work in peace. The sun clambered overhead, its glare a terrific thing that rawed the eyes. As it started tumbling down to the west a trickle could be heard in the wash. A warm night would turn this dry gully into a torrent. Cold weather would freeze it solid. If anything was to be accomplished it had to be done before sunset.

There was no rest. Jack dragged another big steer up to the lip of the wash. He counted a couple hundred there, stretched out lifeless. Tomorrow they would be skinned, their hides saved. The carcasses would make a feast for the buzzards and coyotes who had come from miles around to wait until they could leap into this great bonanza of a meal. Next summer during slack season wagons would collect the bones for fertilizer. Meanwhile only hours were allotted for saving the living.

There were four or five hundred of these gaunted animals already saved and more coming up. There were some that had to be shot. But the sweat and guts of the cowboys were slowly rescuing the Muleshoe from what promised to be disaster. It was still a terrific blow, a tragedy. But the Muleshoe would survive.

Involuntarily Jack had to admit that Slim Lederle was chiefly responsible for the rescue. Slim had done a masterful job of organizing. Jack began to feel that surging pride of a job well done. It was a feeling that filled his chest with a deep, clean breath.

It let him grin as he unhitched the logging chain from the horns of the steer he had brought up from the wash. Then he was startled by the voice that interrupted his thoughts. So intent on his job had he been he had paid little attention to the rider who had come up behind him.

"What's the joke?"

Jack twisted about. Nell Bishop was forking a big palomino gelding. Jack noticed the straightness of her back, and the fact that her Stetson had been blown so that it hung behind her, against her shoulders, making a sort of round frame for her face and dark hair. But he did not see the expression because he was avoiding looking into her eyes, afraid of what he might see there.

"No joke," he said. He went to the head of his team. "Was thinking we done a good job today. Was giving Lederle a lot of the credit."

"Generous of you," she said.

"No," Jack said. "Just realistic. If a man does a good job, his job is good whether you like him or hate him. A good job is a good job."

The girl nodded darkly. She said: "Reckon so, Cowboy. Why didn't you come back to headquarters? This is no work for a man with a broken rib."

"I saw something to do here," Jack said.

The girl was silent a moment. Her horse fiddlefooted half way around. Suddenly Nell said: "You know—Slim saved me from bankruptcy after Pa died. Slim's always done a good job. He knows cattle and he isn't afraid to work. Like you said about yourself, he saw something here to do. You know—I owe him a lot more than just his pay."

Jack could no longer avoid looking into the girl's eyes. What she had said hit him right in the center of his heart. His expression gave him away.

"You think that's why I'm marrying him?" the girl laughed. "So does the cook. So does Hank. I reckon Slim might even think it."

Jack asked: "Are they right?"

The girl shrugged her lovely shoulders. Her jet eyes were suddenly veiled.

"Where is Slim?" she asked. "Where is this enemy of yours?"

"Yonderly," Jack said, pointing with a thumbd fist.

"Oh—yes!" The girl had spotted Slim. Slim had seen her and was walking up the slope toward her. He was still a long way off. Nell waved and he answered. He was coming very slowly with the forward-drooping trudge of a tired man. The girl said in a low voice: "Someday I'll find out why you two hate each other."

"Reckon you will," Jack said.

Jack jerked at the reins of his nigh horse. "Git," he ordered. The horse started to move. "Stop—wait!" the girl shouted.

Jack pulled in the team.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lost Herd

SLIM looked at him a moment apparently surprised to find him here since Jack had been keeping out of the way of the ramrod. After that Slim ignored him. A sharp wind was rising, coming from the north. The horses and men alike tended to back into it.

"You better head right back for home," Slim said to Nell. "We ain't through here yet. The prairie's going to freeze up to-night and the footing won't be safe."

"I'll go in a minute," she promised. "But I had to come down to tell you about Longhorn Creek."

"Sonny Boy told me," Slim said.

"I even had to send Hank down there," the girl said. "They've been having trouble. This thaw flooded all the lowlands inside the bend where they were holding the beef they pulled out of the creek. The cattle are standing around on little islands—and—"

"How many boys are down there?" Slim asked. "How many cows?"

"Only Hank and Pete," the girl said. "Dave broke a leg and the others had to bring him in. They're completely played out. Dave says there are five hundred or so head cooped up there. They'll all be flooded out come morning whether it freezes or not."

"I'll go get them," Slim said. Slim was a man who did not know defeat. "Now—hightail back home, Nell. That's too bad about Dave. He'll need you to look after him. May be more of the boys hurt yet if this stuff freezes. Go on home and keep the fires burning."

"Okay," she said. "Seein' yuh."

She glanced over at Jack and smiled. She had smiled at him before, but not like this. It was provocative with a touch of pure devil in it that he did not savvy.

"Be seein' you, too," she added.

She wheeled her horse and trotted north. As Jack watched her he knew he saw one of the most superb riders he had ever known. Her rhythm in the saddle was one with the horse. He felt again the sudden quickening of heartbeat.

He looked sidewise at Slim Lederle. Slim was watching the girl, too. Slim was holding his breath. A color had come to his cheeks that had not been caused by weather.

"What did she mean by that?" Slim asked in a hoarse whisper.

"I don't know," Jack said. "Maybe she meant she would be seeing me."

Slim Lederle's lips were white. He let his breath go in a long hiss. "Okay, Bright Boy," he said. "I suppose you've been talking to her."

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"Not about what you think," Jack said. "I never felt it made interesting conversation for a lady."

Slim silently began to move away.

Jack stopped him. "Sounds like a herding job down on the Longhorn. I'm pretty good at that. Took half a dozen outfits up the trail since I saw you last. Besides I had a couple good night's sleep. Maybe I can handle this for you."

Slim stared coldly at him. Slim did not understand this. After a while he rasply cleared his throat. "Thaws like this bring a regular floor to the Longhorn. It'll spread clear over the flats. Ice underneath. Even if there is a freeze tonight the flood'll keep rising until midnight or thereabouts. There'll be big chunks of ice floating all around."

Jack shrugged. Slim's cold stare shifted.

"Okay," Slim said.

These men rode to the east forking horses that had been carefully picked from the remuda. The cowboys had brought a portable forge down from the ranch and had shod the dray horses with spiked calks. But the saddle horses still wore their customarily thin shoes on fore hoofs while their hind hoofs were bare. They had little more than hope to keep them from skidding.

Sunset came in a burst of red and yellow fire before they reached the creek. Stars glistened like chips of ice in the sky. The promised freeze was on hand now, brought by the bitter breeze from the north. Chiefly it was noticed in the thin, glass-thick coverings of ice on the pools that cracked under foot with a brittle singing note. It was not yet thick enough to support a horse's weight, nor was it yet very slippery. That would come later.

The two men did not pause with the ending of daylight but continued on with as fast a trot as the horses would accept. They spoke only once. That was when they came to the high bluff marking the lower end of Longhorn's big bend.

SLIM pointed out the flats below, visible only because of starlight reflected in the ice and water and marked out by two fires the cowboys had built as beacons, one at the lower end of the bend, one at the upper end some mile and a half away. The creek itself was bank-over, outlined by

splotches of willow and cottonwood that grew along its steep banks. Here and there black blots marked bunches of cattle standing dismally on higher ground that the water had not yet reached.

"Under all that water is ice," Slim said. "If you slipped in it you'd be washed downstream. Nobody'd ever know if it was an accident or not."

"I was thinking of that myself," Jack said. "There's even a fair chance your body would never be found."

Their eyes met for a moment. Slim turned away first. He gestured with an arm as he changed the subject:

"We'll go in from the south—drive the cows into the flooded land from their islands and north from there. I brought along some dynamite to encourage them. Maybe we can stampede them. That's the only way we can get them out."

"Reckon you're right," Jack admitted.

He could see it now. If the cattle were left down there on the flats the rising water would sooner or later drown them. But now that they had temporary refuge they would refuse to budge into growing flood until it would be too late to save them. Dynamite would force them into the still-shallow water and onward to dry land.

Slim went ahead, turning his horse down a bluff, taking it at an angle, sliding in the soft snow to the bottom. The horses bucked against it. Then they entered the flooded flatlands and the horses absolutely refused to move. Slim beat his mount cruelly with a lariat and spurred it unmercifully until the horse went ahead. Once he was in the water, Jack's horse followed.

The depth of water varied from almost nothing to hock deep to belly deep, and was so bitter cold it was a torture. Now and then blocks of ice and chunks of frozen drifts came slowly by. Jack's mount shied at one of these, slipped and nearly fell. His slick hind feet slithered out from under, lost their purchase. The horse had to sit in the water until Jack stepped from the saddle to help him up again. The water sloshed over Jack's boot-tops.

They could not stop. Jack got aboard and emptied his boots and overshoes as he progressed. His pantlegs began to stiffen where they had been wetted. The horses were warier now, careful of floating ice. They pointed their noses for the lower of

the two fires and made a beeline for it. Here Jack and Slim found old Hank O'Keefe dismally piling on wood. He had built a fire where a roll in the prairie lifted it above the flood. The area was only about the size of a baseball diamond's infield. Hank kept a poker face when he recognized his visitors.

"Welcome to Siberia," Hank said. "Where's the rest of your outfit?"

"We're all," Slim said. "What's happened to the boys?"

"Only was two of us. Pete's keepin' the north fire. The water's gone up a foot in the last hour. In another hour we won't be able to get out of here at all." He took a watch from his pocket and turned it to the fire to look at it. "Wait a second," he said. He waded into the water to the right to a peeled stick that stood above the flood. There were bits of rawhide tied to the stick at regular intervals. "Gone up four inches in the last fifteen minutes," he announced.

He waded out of the water and stood a moment by the fire, warming his hands. He kicked a smouldering brand into the fire.

"I never went beyond the third grade in school," he said, "but I know that four inches in fifteen minutes comes to more'n a foot a hour. I'm goin' home, gentlemen."

"Go ahead," Slim said.

Old Hank seemed surprised. Slim's voice had been angry.

"We can't save that herd," Hank argued. "It's too late. We'd have to drag them cows up to high land one at a time by plain strength." Hank was talking with great earnestness. "We won't be able to save ourselves in another few minutes."

Slim Lederle lifted the arm that held the whip. "Get the hell on your way, damn it!" he shouted.

"We'd be damn fools—" Hank started to protest.

Then he licked his lips. He looked to Jack for sympathy and found none there. Hank put a foot in the stirrup of his horse and wearily swung into leather. The old-timer knew he should never have come down here in the first place. This was young man's work.

His horse snorted. He somehow surmised that he was going home. Eagerly he went into the water. When the coldness of it hit him he hesitated. Then he went ahead gingerly.

Hank faded into the darkness.

Slim Lederle and Jack Boyden were alone. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Better Man. . . .

SLIM brought out his sticks of dynamite. He got down beside the fire and went to work tying these sticks to bits of wood large enough to float them. He fixed caps and fuses, making the fuses short enough so that the explosion would be almost instantaneous.

"You take half of these and I'll take the other half," he told Jack. "We'll sneak up on the cows from the down-stream side. We'll take the bunch on yonder rise first and try to keep them moving so they'll pick up the other bunches on the way to high ground. Okay?"

"Okay," Jack said. There was only a slight chance of this scheme working, but it was the best for the conditions here on the flats. "It's too damn bad you're a skunk," Jack said to Slim. "If you weren't a skunk I'd have to admit you were a smart guy."

"Thanks," Slim said. "Ever hear of smart skunks?" He did not expect an answer. He gathered the bundles of dynamite, divided them in half and gave one bunch to Jack. "Don't throw any of this until I holler," he said. "We'll take along some burning punk from the fire to start these fuses. Maybe this stuff will stampede the cows, and maybe it won't. We got to try it, though, and we got to keep the cows going north if we once get them moving."

Jack said: "Let's go."

Slim was looking at Jack in a very strange way. "You think I'm just plain rotten," he said.

Jack shrugged. "I was in jail. They were going to hang me. You ran out on me and took all our horses as well."

"You shot that tinhorn," Slim said. "I didn't."

"We were in it together," Jack said. "Like we're in this together. When they had me locked up you stole me clean."

"They were looking for me, too," Slim protested. "I figured you wouldn't need those horses after they hanged you. There

was nothing I could do about that. When I got a chance to hightail—I hightailed.”

Jack spit into the fire. His horse was moving about restlessly. Water had come up in the last minutes to wash the mount's hoofs and make him move ahead.

“There ain't any more to say on that score,” Jack said. “We better get Miss Nell's beef out of here—”

Slim Lederle was gnawing at his mustache.

“Yeah—” he said. “Maybe I was a damn fool, Jack, but—uh—well, let's get after these cows.”

He did not finish his excuse. He rose to the saddle. Jack followed suit. Jack's feet were cold and soggy in their wet boots. Leaning down to the fire he picked up a flaming stick. This would soon burn out, but it might last to help get the first bunch of steers on the move. He jabbed his mount with spurs and the horse was so startled he jumped into the icy water before he had time to think of what he was doing. Immediately he fought back.

Slim was beside him. The two big horses went on with stubborn reluctance. On their snowy island the cattle bellowed dismally, their faces all turned toward the riders who approached with burning brands reflecting the black water. The bees were annoyed and frightened. They were likely to do anything.

“Let go with the first one,” Slim ordered.

Jack touched wick to burning wood. The wick sputtered meanly. He heaved the grenade and saw it fall short of the island. Miraculously the fuse was not extinguished. Suddenly the whole thing let go with a terrific blast. Water spouted into the air and a chunk of wood hummed past Jack's ears. The cows stared stupidly at the source of the great racket. A moment later Slim's grenade blew up. Jack spurred his frightened horse ahead. He fired his sixshooter into the air and howled like a Comanche.

The cattle closest to this racket decided the time had come when they must leave this fearsome place. They turned tail and ran with a thunderous bellow. The more reluctant bees up yonder in the darkness at the edge of the freezing water were pushed off the island into knee-deep water. They spotted more of their kind far ahead in the night and aimed their noses in that direction, plowing through the water,

churning it into choppy waves of white foam.

Behind them Slim and Jack gave them no chance to hesitate. When the leaders reached the next island the cowboys set off more dynamite bombs and charged in screaming, shooting. By now both men were soaking wet. Jack hardly noticed it. The exhilaration of battle buried all fatigue for the moment, all pain and sense of freezing wind slicing down the valley of the creek.

Once Jack glanced behind. The fire that had been burning to the rear had gone out, washed away by rising water that now completely covered the island where they had come across old Hank O'Keefe. Now the fire to the north of the big bend was growing as they approached it. A sudden spurt of sparks indicated that the cowboy tending it was still there and had thrown on more wood. It was like a lighthouse in the night. To the left of it was safety—to the right was the deep creek and disaster.

They flushed their third and apparently last bunch of cattle and had the whole lot swimming and struggling north in terror, heading for solid land. They were down to their last stick of dynamite apiece; and were almost out of cartridges. But they were within sight of success. They had saved the herd. . . .

Then Slim spurred across to the right at a slant, yelling at Jack. Jack thought Slim was after him now. Then Slim turned north and Jack got it. The leaders of the herd swerved from their path. It was not much; but it was enough to take them to the right of the beacon fire where they would all be lost in the upper arc of the big bend of Longhorn Creek.

Somehow Slim managed to cut around behind them. He heaved his last stick of dynamite. Its geyser was a million bits of shining diamonds against the bonfire. When it settled the herd had changed its course. Jack heaved his last charge. The cattle took on the speed of sheer terror and headed straight for the high country. Once they reached it they would keep running until they were dry and warm.

Jack grinned wearily. He looked around for Slim. Slim seemed to have gotten into trouble. In his last effort to turn the herd he had ridden too far to the east, over the invisible bank of the stream into the river itself. He was clinging to the horn of his

saddle and paddling with his free hand while the horse swam frantically downstream just beyond the willows. Even as Jack hesitated, watching Slim, the man who had been tending the upper fire shouted something into the darkness.

Jack glanced back; saw him lift into the saddle of his waiting horse. A moment later the fire began to sputter and a great column of steam hissed skyward. The flood was reaching the last bit of land in the flats. The cowboy who had been watching the beacon was following in the wake of the herd. Down here the flats were wide and dark and cold and lonely.

JACK did not really think about this. His luck that had formerly been so bad had carried him through this day. It had dunked Slim in the creek from which he was now trying to extricate himself. It had left Jack on land, not the best of land since it was covered with three to four feet of water, but land never-the-less. Jack's luck had put into his hands the opportunity he had so long dreamed about of getting even with Slim Lederle.

He reined his horse toward the creek where he had last seen Slim. The animal bucked and kicked. A big chunk of ice swirling by rubbed against Jack's leg. The horse skittered off and Jack realized for the first time that the water was reaching for the swellfork of his saddle. Jack's weight alone kept the horse's hoofs on the ground.

Then he spotted Slim yonder between a couple of willows fighting frantically to get out of the current of the river. He angled down, moving slowly as a man will in a dream. He shook out his rope, found that it was frozen solid. He beat it against the cantle until it regained some degree of flexibility. Then he brought his horse down to a spot where he had a little better footing and he let his loop fly.

He did not see where it landed, for his already terrified horse began to buck again and slipped on the ice below. The bitter water grabbed at Jack like a frozen fist. It choked the wind in his lungs and bit at his skin. In the first awful spasm of it he lost his seat and was thrown into the swirl. Miraculously he kept his grip on the reins.

When he struggled to the surface he still

had a horse at his disposal—and when he could see again he saw that Slim had lost his mount. Slim's horse with no rider was swimming straight for the bluffs.

Jack had pulled himself back into leather before he discovered he had caught a fish. Without thinking about it, old habit had caused him to tie his rope to the horn before he made his loop. It was still tied, and at the other end was Slim Lederle.

It gave Jack a strange, ugly lift. He had not lost his chance at revenge, after all.

Slowly he reeled in the rope. Meanwhile his horse, on his own accord, had started north, searching for land. Slim approached splashing oddly. The rope was over his wrist and sometimes it dragged him under. At other times it let him surface for a breath. Then he was up alongside Jack like a huge shark ready for the gaff. He had lost his hat. His eyes were wild, and there was ice on his mustache.

"Why'd you come after me?" he asked.

"We got an engagement," Jack said.

"Remember? Chances are nobody's find a body down here. If they did—they wouldn't know how that body had died. You said that, yourself."

"Yeah—" Slim waited a long time. "I said it."

The horse had reached the upper end of the bend and was heroically dragging himself and his double burden onto the now flooded rise where the fire had been. Hanging on alongside the saddle Slim felt ground underfoot. Slim shook off the rope around his wrist. Clinging with left hand to the cantle of Jack's saddle he stumbled up onto the rise.

"You don't know how I've hated myself," he said. "I work until I'm ready to drop. Remember the old days—never worked at all, hardly. But now—I got to work—to forget—to remember, too, reckon."

The horse was climbing out onto shallower water. Jack's feet felt heavy in the stirrups now that they were free of buoyancy. Slim was only thigh deep now. The will for revenge had burned mighty low in Jack. He had saved Slim's life once tonight—a life Slim had almost lost doing a gallant piece of work for Nell Bishop. It just did not make sense to try and kill a man after saving him.

"Let's try and forget it," Jack said.

Slim saw a stick floating by, about the size of a baseball bat, hissing faintly. It was the last of the fire that had burned on this mound and was now being floated off by the rising flood. It presented Slim with something more concrete than talk. He reached for it. He felt the charcoal crunch against his hard hands. Then he swung up and around with it, using both hands, aiming it for the back of Jack's head.

Jack saw it coming but could not get away from it. He tumbled forward and down, taking the blow on the shoulders after the peak of its power. It dragged him around, downward, and drove him up against Slim. Between the weight of Jack and the circular pull of the club Slim was whirled around and thrown off his feet. He managed however to twist about so that he ended up on top of Jack in the icy water. He shoved a knee into Jack's face, holding him down there under the frozen black surface.

Jack could get no traction on the slippery, icy grass. He rolled his face side-wise so Slim's knee slipped off. Then he jabbed up with his own knee and felt it strike into Slim's stomach. A second later he surfaced, gasping, biting for air.

Slim had been thrown to one side, but had gotten to his feet and was coming in at a crouch. Jack backed up. He let Slim close in slightly and then swung a fist. The sting of knuckles against Slim's cheekbone was a pleasant sensation. But it did not stop Slim. Slim chopped down at Jack's left ear and knocked him off balance, dumping him into the water again.

When he came up Slim was swinging another club at his head. Jack butted in. He butted hard, and kept on butting, driving Slim back in water that dragged at his legs like glue. He butted and punched short punches to the belly. He ignored the beating of that club on his back until Slim's spurs caught in some underwater weeds and Slim tumbled backward. Then Jack beat him down into the water and turned away.

HE FOUND his horse, waiting on the highest ground, standing in hock-deep water, ready for fate to take him. Jack could not get into the saddle. There was no strength left in his muscles sufficient to pull him that high. For seconds he leaned against his mount, sucking in short

breaths, while the cold wind gnawed at him. He saw something move in the flood below him. He stumbled toward it.

Jack began to laugh. There was Slim. Jack wondered what Nell Bishop would think of this. He laughed at what Slim would think of it if that hombre was still capable of thinking, for as he laughed Slim, who had propped himself up on his club, slowly slid forward, face down into the water. Slim had given out. Slim had come to the end of his string.

Jack got him by the collar. He could barely hold Slim's face above water. He pulled him along that way until they reached the horse. He remembered something Slim had said after the merciless beating in the cookshack, after Slim had kicked in his ribs.

"If he can't sit a horse," Slim had said, "tie him on it. Get rid of him."

Jack hoisted Slim to his feet. He draped Slim's arms over the saddle and tied him down. Then he got in front of the horse and led him into the water. He went into this terribly cold water and after a while he was out of it again though he had no memory of wading through it.

He knew he was out of the water and on high ground by the lack of drag on his feet and the bite of cold that was worse than the water. He tried to cheer and the wind snatched away his voice.

He laughed, feeling the heat of tears on his cheeks. Then he fell on his face. He got up again and pulled Slim down to the ground and slapped him until Slim opened his eyes.

"Come on, boy," he said. "We got to get going. We got to get moving. We got to walk, Slim, or freeze."

Slim did not say anything. His eyes rolled queerly. The horse sniffed at Jack, then trotted off. Jack got Slim on his feet, somehow. Half holding him up, half dragging him, they stumbled on toward the Muleshoe. They went on while their clothing froze like armor and their hair became a helmet. They were still stumbling forlornly onward when a rescue crew found them. Old Hank O'Keefe and Nell Bishop with blankets and a jug of hot whiskey. . . .

Jack sat by the fire in the living room of the Muleshoe ranchhouse. He was still cold. His teeth chattered though he now wore dry clothing and was wrapped in a

heavy blanket and bearskin robe. The hot toddies had not seemed to help much, either. They only warmed his stomach, leaving the rest of him cold. On the other side of the hearth Nell Bishop sat on a little rawhide and ironwood stool watching him. She was keeping him supplied with toddies.

"You haven't told me why you hate Slim so," she said. "You hate him—but you brought him back. Nobody thought you'd both come back. You know, I would never have let you go down there with him if I had known about it."

Jack smiled thinly. He tried to steady his jaw. Slim was out there in the bunkhouse now sleeping it off. In a couple days, barring pneumonia, Slim would be all right. Jack felt as if he had gone through Hell for nothing.

"You haven't told me why you are going to marry him," Jack countered. "You hate him, too. But you're still going to marry him."

She poked at the fire, studied the pattern of sparks shooting up the chimney.

"I'm not going to marry him," she said. Her voice was very small, clear like a tiny silver sleigh bell. "I changed my mind about that. Matter of fact—I'm not at all sure I ever had my mind made up. It was—well, I owed him a lot. A girl has to marry some day, and he was the biggest man I

had ever known. Even you said he stuck to his job down there on the flats when most men would have quit."

"Sure—" Jack said. He stared at the fire, then back at the girl. He did not tell her that Slim had admitted his drive came from a bad conscience. He was ready now to forgive Slim—to forget. They were quits. "You said 'was'." Jack's eyes were very intent.

There was nervousness in the girl's brief laugh.

"Was!" she emphasized it. "When I saw what he had done to your ribs with his heel when you were down it made him shrink up a bit. And then—I met a bigger man tonight." The unsteady quality of her laugh vibrated through her again. The fire was back in her dark eyes. "Or am I being presumptuous in thinking that meeting this bigger man will make any difference in my life. Maybe he is too big for me."

"Could be, Ma'am," Jack bowed to her. His smile warmed up slowly. "I sort of reckon not though. If the feller you're talkin' about is in this room, he ain't very much aware of size. He just does the job he's got to do."

"So do I!" Nell said.

She came over to him. He kissed her hand. Then he stood and kissed her on the mouth. She put her arms around his neck to cling to him. Jack stopped shivering.

THE END

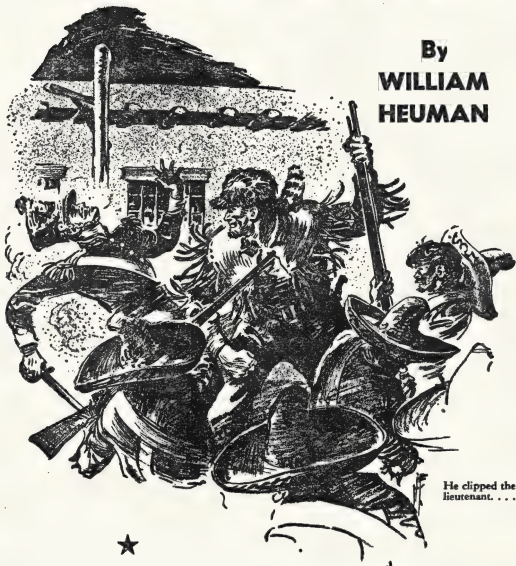
**YOU'RE NEITHER
TOO YOUNG
NOR TOO OLD!**

**I GET THAT
"JUST RIGHT" LOOK
FROM SMOOTH
STAR BLADES!**



MEXICAN GUN RIDE

By
**WILLIAM
HEUMAN**



He clipped the
lieutenant. . .



His only assets a quick smile and a quicker six-shooter, Joel Brand had to take his cargo of Texican bullets smack into Santa Anna's stronghold.



HE WAS far from his usual haunts, and the jaded Indian pony seemed to know it. He rode with the big brass-mounted Hawkins mountain rifle slung across the pommel of the high-cantled California saddle, and a heavy .44 Walker Dragoon Colt sagging in the leather embossed gun belt.

The ten weary mules tagged along behind him as he came into the dirt road leading to the Texan town of San Pablo. Each

mule was piled high with beaver pleys worth sixty dollars in St. Louis, six at the rendezvous. They were far from St. Louis.

Joel Brand, mountain man, stared at the squat little adobe buildings ahead of him. They gleamed white in the afternoon sun, the heat devils shimmering between the houses and the rider.

He was big with tremendous shoulders bulging out of the grease-daubed buck-skin jacket. His face was browned and grim, without an ounce of superfluous fat. Quiet gray eyes peered out from under the racoon-skin cap.

There was no market in San Pablo for ten packs of beaver pleys, yet he had been moving steadily down from Santa Fe the past two weeks, wasting no time, and pushing the mules relentlessly.

The Mexican rurale nodded his "bueno" to him as he entered the town. The peace officer, fat and moon-faced, sat in the shade of an adobe hut. He stared at the packs curiously.

Joel's lips tightened. His eyes flitted back and forth across the road as he walked the shaggy mustang through the street. A pig dug in the dust. Scrawny chickens fluttered in front of him, squawking strenuously.

Quickly, he sighted the presidio where the new Mexican garrison was stationed. El Presidente Santa Anna had sent Mexican soldiers north to the Texan province to quell any signs of an uprising. There had been talk among the Americanos. Commissioners had been sent to Mexico City, and Santa Anna had spoken to them politely, and then consigned them to the dungeons of Los Matros!

Starry-eyed señoritas stood in the doorways and smiled at the big mountain man as he moved through the streets. He realized that he was in the Mexican quarter. Up ahead, he would enter the American section of the town—cleaner, more awake.

A bugle blared, and a squadron of Mexican foot soldiers rounded a corner and bore down toward him. Joel edged the pony in toward the buildings. The young lieutenant in charge of the platoon cast a cool glance at him. He was a thin-faced, dark-eyed man with a wisp of black mustache and thin straight lips.

He drew up haughtily in front of the mountain man and jabbered in Spanish.

Joel shook his head grimly. He stared at the dozen soldiers, dull-faced, bleary-eyed, slatternly-attired. It was rumored that Santa Anna since coming into power had opened prison doors and enlisted convicts in the army. The new presidente did not speak for Mexico as a whole. He'd gotten control of the government and his convict army kept him in power.

The Mexican lieutenant changed to English which he spoke with only a slight accent.

"You have come in from the States, senior?" he asked impertinently.

Joel nodded briefly. He'd met this type of Mexican in Santa Fe. They were drunk with power as their soldiers were bewildered with pulque. He felt the hatred rising within him; he'd come down to Texas to repay a debt. It was to men like this young lieutenant to whom he owed it.

"I assume you have paid the customs fee in Santa Fe?" the lieutenant snapped.

Again Joel nodded. The lieutenant was showing off before his platoon. Now and then he glanced toward them to see the reaction. They were listening, mouths opened in amazement. The big Americano had been a man to be feared once; now the new order in Mexico City treated them as dogs.

The lieutenant walked toward the nearest mule. Joel Brand watched him closely, his right hand slipping down toward the Colt.

"Prime beaver pelts," the mountain man murmured. "I'm delivering them to an American in San Pablo."

"There are no Americans in San Pablo," the officer barked. "All are Mexican citizens. They have taken an oath."

Joel shrugged. The colonists on the other side of the Brazos had taken land in Texas and were satisfied to be ruled by the peaceful government of Mexico City. Since Santa Anna had come into power, all had been changed. They resented the garrisons the new president had ordered north to all the Texan towns; they resented the domineering officers from Mexico City, and the sodden soldiery who carried out their orders.

"Who is the American?" the Lieutenant snapped.

"A friend," Joel said. He watched the officer reach out a hand toward the pack and he drew the Colt quickly from the

holster. "Get your hand down, mister," he said softly.

The lieutenant stared into the muzzle of the big gun, his face going a dull red. One of the soldiers laughed foolishly and the lieutenant roared, "Silence."

"I'm an American citizen," Joel said, a grim smile on his face. "Don't touch the packs."

"I'll have you shot," the lieutenant snarled, "for resisting a Mexican officer."

"I figure," Joel said, the smile still twisting his mouth, "you'd be pretty dead before you could give the order, mister." He held the muzzle on the officer's heart, and the hand was as steady as a rock.

The lieutenant went white. He choked with rage as he gave the order to "march."

Joel Brand watched them go. The Mexican officer would not forget this insult. He'd find ways and means of getting back at the Americano.

The mountain man crossed into Texan territory. The cantina of Sam Coleman stood on the boundary line. It was a wood structure of heavy logs, squarely built, with a corral behind it, and a stable adjoining the saloon.

JOEL glanced up at the name on the sign-board over the door. Several Mexicans sat on the ground in the shade and grinned at him as he turned the pack mules toward the corral.

A bulky man with a round head and tremendous waist appeared in the doorway. He was hatless and his dome was nearly bald. He had two chins, a small mouth, and quiet blue eyes.

The mountain man stared at him thoughtfully. "Coleman?" he asked.

The fat man nodded. He looked at the mules and then up the street.

"Take them into the barn, amigo," he said.

Joel Brand moistened his lips. He looked down at the peons and then kicked the mustang and rode past them toward the stable. The proprietor of the cantina walked around and opened the door for him.

"Texas Forever," he said suddenly.

The trapper slipped from the pony and walked his animals into the stable. He bent down to loose the diamond hitch on the nearest mule, while Coleman closed the barn doors and slid a bolt across them.

"We Are Coming," Joel murmured. He saw the grin spread over the fat man's face.

"Who sent you?" the proprietor asked. He too went to work on the packs, loosening the ropes.

"Martin Tobias," Joel explained, "of Santa Fe." He stripped off the covering of beaver skins, revealing four pigs of Galena lead neatly tied in among the few skins on the mule's back.

Sam Coleman had also uncovered the layer of skins and was lifting to the ground small squat kegs of Dupont powder. "You made an enemy in young Armand," the fat man said as he worked. "I watched you pull a gun on him, trapper. He's a caballero. Watch out for him."

Joel Brand smiled slowly. "I reckon I can handle him," he said.

"Not the whole Mexican army," Coleman pointed out. "Santa Anna has two troops of regulars in San Pablo—near two hundred men." The fat man opened a trap door beneath a pile of hay, and pushed the lead pigs and powder kegs toward the hole in the floor.

Joel heard him chuckle as he pushed his bulk down the hole. "It would be a feather in Lieutenant Armand's cap," he grinned, "to find this cache. We have enough powder, lead and munitions down here to supply three hundred Texans when it begins."

"It has to begin?" Joel asked.

Coleman looked at him queerly. "You're not a Texan, mister," he said quietly, "or you wouldn't say that." He paused as he lifted a heavy keg down through the opening. "Santa Anna imprisons our commissioners. He keeps garrisons up here whether we want 'em or not. We're not *pelados*."

The trapper laughed grimly and steadily regarded Coleman.

"You took a risk," Coleman went on, "to bring this stuff from Santa Fe. If Armand would have gotten inside the pack you'd be thrown in the brig and then stood against the wall. Why did you do it?"

"I know a little about the commissioners who went to Mexico City," Joel said slowly. "My brother was one of them. They let him go two months ago. I met him in Santa Fe. His hair is white and he's not much older than I. His eyesight is just beginning to come back."

"You ask me," Coleman said, "if it will begin."

"I want to be in it," Joel Brand murmured. "I was coming to Texas when Tobias spoke to me." He stared at Coleman. "There are others all over the States getting ready to cross the border when the war begins. You won't be alone."

"We'll need every man," the proprietor nodded. "Santa Anna can throw at least six thousand men into the field. We're lucky if we have a thousand Texans when the fighting starts." He looked down through the trap door before closing it. "At any rate we'll be well-armed," he grinned. "They have three six pounders carefully hidden in the mission at San Antonio."

Joel laughed softly. "It's Concord and Lexington all over again," he said, "only we're up against Santa Anna's ex-convicts instead of the British regulars."

"I'm storing powder and lead," Coleman explained. The other stations have the guns. If the Mexican garrison here discovers our cache, it'll be a tough blow for liberty."

"Why?" Joel asked.

The fat man shrugged. "The Texans aren't united as yet. It'll take an invasion by El Presidente's forces to get them together. That means we'll have to defeat the first expedition from the south. If we fall in the beginning, all is lost."

Joel Brand walked into the cantina with Sam Coleman. He noticed the sharp-eyed white men sitting at the tables and along the bar. They looked at him and Sam Coleman nodded his head. These were the Texas militia—the 'Minute Men' of the Texas war for independence about to begin.

"Texas Forever," the man nearest Joel muttered at the bar.

"We Are Coming," Joel said. It was the pass-word Tobias, the Santa Fe trader, had given him. Tobias was a good friend of Tom Brand. Both men were working now for Texas independence. The original reason for the commission to Mexico City was reconciliation and understanding.

"Come into the kitchen," Coleman told him. "I'll fix you something to eat."

The big trapper followed the fat man to the rear room. He sat down in a small chair by the table. "What about Lieutenant Armand?" he asked,

COLEMAN smiled grimly. "He's a young man with plenty of ambition. The commanding officer of the garrison is positive that the Texans have an ammunition depot in this town, but they don't know where. If Armand is able to find it, it'll be a feather in his cap."

"And he's suspicious?" Joel asked.

"Of everybody," the fat man grinned. "That was the reason he stopped you this afternoon. He'll be around later to check up. I'll tell him I purchased the skins from you." He paused. "I have a wagon waiting at all times to transport the lead and powder to El Paso at the first sign that the Mexican garrison suspects anything."

They went back to the cantina a half hour later and Joel saw the young lieutenant coming through the door. Armand hadn't forgotten the insult. The trapper saw the hatred in the man's dark eyes.

Armand sauntered up to the bar and ordered a drink. Coleman waited on him quietly, his blue eyes flitting now and then to Joel's face. Plainly, the proprietor wanted him to leave to avoid trouble.

Joel walked toward the door. Lieutenant Armand turned around.

"You are in a hurry, senor?" he asked softly.

"No," Joel said.

Armand lit a small brown ciragette and puffed on it with satisfaction. "You realize, senor," he continued, "that I can have you horse-whipped for pulling a gun on a Mexican officer."

"You'll get yourself into trouble with the American authorities," Joel snapped.

"We are far from American territory," Armand smiled. "Major Santara would like to see you at the post, ladron."

Joel caught Coleman's warning glance. If they got him into the garrison jail, there was no telling when he would get out again.

Armand walked to the door and called loudly.

Sam Coleman leaned across the bar. "There's a horse saddled and ready in the barn," he grated. "Take it and ride."

Joel glanced toward the side door. He could make it in three quick jumps before Armand could bring in his soldiers. A pair of Mexican cavalymen came in the side door. Four others appeared at the front entrance, pushing past the Lieutenant.

The Texans in the room were all stand-

ing, ready to join in the fight if Coleman gave the word. They were men with families and they realized what would happen if they resisted Santa Anna's forces.

Joel Brand stared at the Texans and then shook his head. If they helped him now, it would throw suspicion on Coleman's cantina. They couldn't risk losing the powder and lead.

As the two cavalymen came closer, Joel stepped toward them, hands upraised. He saw the expression of surprise on their swarthy faces. They had been fumbling with the pistols in their belts, and had evidently expected resistance from the big Americano.

Joel walked toward them calmly. As the nearest man reached toward the Walker Colt, the trapper brought a heavy fist across his paw. Then, like a big panther, he pounced on the second soldier, knocking him against the bar with his clubbed fist.

He heard Lieutenant Armand yell and a pistol cracked behind him, the ball slamming into the doorpost. He tried to leap over the first soldier he'd knocked down. His foot struck the man's outstretched hand and he sprawled forward in the doorway.

Immediately, three of the men from the front door pounced on him, clubbing with their pistols. Joel struggled to get to his feet. A glancing blow on the side of the head, knocked him to his knees again. He threw off one Mexican soldier, but the others closed in on him. They had him around the legs and around the shoulders.

He saw Sam Coleman's tense face as he went down again. The Texan was leaning over the bar, watching helplessly. Once again, Joel nearly got to his feet. He managed to pick up one of the six men attacking him and throw him against the wall. The others got him to the ground. A pistol barrel across the forehead took all the strength from him.

He felt them hauling him to his feet and he heard Lieutenant Armand's thin voice. Out in the street, a small crowd gathered to watch the Mexicans drag him toward the presidio. It was almost dusk.

He was taken through a gate in the adobe wall, and then across a small barren courtyard toward the headquarters building.

In a large carpeted room, lighted by two

oil lamps, Joel found Major Santara in command of the post at San Pablo. The Major sat behind a desk, a long Mexican cigar in his mouth. He was small, with straight black hair, a wide mouth, and a squint in one eye. He carried his head to one side and stared at the prisoner like a bird.

"The Americano," Armand said. "He arrived this afternoon from Santa Fe with a trainload of mules. He refused to let me inspect the packs."

"Why?" the Major snapped.

"I passed the customs in Santa Fe," Joel told him quietly.

Santara laughed. "Where are the packs now?" he asked Armand.

"At Coleman's cantina," the lieutenant explained.

Santara stared at the prisoner thoughtfully. "Do you know Senor Coleman?" he asked suddenly.

"No," Joel said. "I was selling him beaver skins through a man in Santa Fe." He caught the quick glance Santara gave to the lieutenant. It was obvious both men suspected Coleman already.

"Take a dozen men," the Major said, "and return with the packs. If you cannot find them, search every inch of the cantina, and then bring Coleman to me." He looked at Joel searchingly. "Take the prisoner with you, Lieutenant," he added. "Perhaps he can show you where Coleman deposited the skins."

A SOLDIER behind the trapper, poked him with a gun, and Joel turned around and headed for the door. Coleman was probably aware of the danger already and might be loading the wagon, but he would need more time to get the powder and lead out of the cellar. In some way, he had to be given that time.

Joel Brand walked steadily down the corridor with the two soldiers behind him and Lieutenant Armand at his side. It was impossible to make a break here. They would shoot him down before he could take two steps.

"Your friend, Senor Coleman," Armand said slyly, "is in for an unpleasant surprise."

The trapper didn't answer. Outside the door the lieutenant called for a squad of troops. They formed on either side with

the prisoner in the midst, and marched toward the presidio gate.

The streets were dark now as they walked through the Mexican quarter toward Coleman's cantina. Joel saw the lights through the tiny windows in the adobe walls. A soldier at the head of the procession carried a burning torch to light the way.

The mountain man rubbed his hands on the blackened deer-skin leggings. They could see him as long as that torch was lit. If he could put it out—

He walked more slowly and Armand stared at him. He'd sustained a head cut from the pistol blow, and his face was still bloody. He lifted a hand to his forehead and then staggered forward as if in a faint.

On hands and knees, he crouched in the dirt. Armand gave an order, and the man with the torch came back toward them. Joel Brand shook his head. He looked up at the lieutenant foolishly.

"On your feet, bandido," the young man snapped.

The trapper tried to get up. He lurched forward a few steps toward the soldier with the torch. Then with a quick spring, he pounced on the man, knocking the torch from his hands. It sputtered out in the dust of the road.

Bending low, Joel leaped in among the men, lashing out with both fists. In the darkness, they could not see him. He heard Armand yell and he smashed a fist in the lieutenant's direction. The officer screamed in pain as the hard hand broke his nose. He went down to the earth, sobbing.

There was an alley in between two of the buildings nearby, and Joel darted for it. His dark buckskins made him a poor target at night. Several bullets followed him, but none hit, as he cut down a side street and streaked toward Coleman's cantina.

The fat man had heard the shots and he was waiting outside, gun in hand, when Joel came up to him.

"They want to search the place," the trapper said hurriedly. "Is your wagon ready?"

"It's being loaded," the proprietor muttered, "but it'll take another twenty minutes to get all the stuff out." He stared at the trapper gloomily. "They'll be headin' for here the first thing," he added.

Joel took the gun from the man's hand. "Give me a bag of shells," he said quietly. "I might be able to hold them off."

"How—?" Coleman began, but Joel was already pushing him into the house. Any moment the Mexican troopers would be up at the door. They found a pouch full of cartridges behind the bar and Joel stuck it inside his coat. He raced for the door again.

"Get the wagon off as soon as you can," he called back to the fat man. He saw the dim light in the barn, and the bulk of a wagon drawn up outside the door.

Down the street he heard the shrill cries of the Mexican troopers as they ran toward him. He fired a shot toward them and then raced away. He knew they wouldn't stop to investigate at the cantina until they had recaptured him.

He fired again at the corner and a volley of shots came back at him. Lieutenant Armand was with the soldiers, screaming curses as he ran. The trapper turned down another alley, moving back to the Mexican quarter.

He saw the horses drawn up outside one of the buildings and he hesitated for a brief second. On horseback, Armand could never catch up with him. He could ride out into the night and stay in hiding until he was able to locate the Texan commanding officer and join the new Texan army.

Armed, and with a horse beneath him, he could even find his way back to the States and wait till the war actually began before enlisting. This, undoubtedly, was the safest course.

But he'd told Sam Coleman that he would give him time to get the wagon loaded and away. That powder and lead would be needed when the fighting began. He thought of Tom's wan face and the white hair. The older brother didn't have to risk his life in Mexico City with the commission, but he'd had a vision. There were things bigger than a man's life.

There was an abandoned shack directly across the road. Joel saw the wooden door sagging on its hinges. There was one small window, high up in the wall.

He fired another shot back toward the troopers and then raced across the road. He heard their yell of triumph as they saw him go into the building.

Stepping to the window in the darkness,

he lifted his gun and fired. Before, he had been shooting to make them come after him. Now it was business. The first Mexican soldier stumbled as he reached the corner. He staggered out into the road and pitched forward on his face.

Joel watched the others scatter for cover. They had him trapped, but it would take them time before they could get him out. The shots had probably been heard at the presidio and Major Santara would be sending out another squadron to help Armand.

The trapper reached inside his jacket for the bag of cartridges. He reloaded the gun and waited. They would not dare to rush him directly, and he had only a stray bullet to worry about.

KEEPING to the side of the window, he was able to watch without revealing himself. Another Mexican tried to scurry across the road to a better vantage point. Joel dropped him with a single shot.

He heard the yells, and a half dozen slugs hit the adobe wall, a few passing through the window inches from his face. He smiled coolly.

There was a clatter of horses hoofs from the other end of the street. He heard Lieutenant Armand yell and he knew the reinforcements had arrived. They had him completely surrounded now. Sooner or later, they would try to rush the door.

He kept the Colt loaded and waited. The more time they took, the more time Coleman would have to get the wagon away. He could hear Armand talking excitedly with the relieving officer. They were up at the other end of the street and he was unable to get a shot at them.

Then Armand began to give the orders to close in. The mountain man heard the shouts in the darkness. A dozen men suddenly broke from cover and sprinted for the door, firing as they came.

Joel dropped two of them with quick shots before the others reached the door. He fired twice through the wood and he heard the screams. The remaining two slugs in the gun knocked down two more men in the huddle outside.

The others hesitated a moment as Joel jammed cartridges into the empty cylinders. When they came again, he was ready for them. He hit three more of the troopers

before they broke for cover. Seven men were lying in the road and another crawling toward cover.

Joel ejected the spent shells and reloaded. The gun was becoming hot in his hands. They would not attempt to rush the door again. Lieutenant Armand would have to think up something else, and in the meantime Sam Coleman and his Texans would have the munitions well on the way to safety.

There was another conference going on between the Mexican officers and Joel listened in. They were speaking in Spanish and he could not understand what was being said.

From several nearby homes, with the doors locked, and the windows bolted, he heard the peons yelling derisively at the troopers for not being able to capture a single Americano. Santa Anna's men were not well-liked even in their own country.

One of the soldiers came out with a torch and a white flag. Joel held his fire. He saw Lieutenant Armand walking up, unarmed.

"Will you come out for a talk?" the officer called.

Joel laughed at him. "I can talk here," he said.

Armand came closer. "Tell us what you know about Senor Coleman," he said, "and the munitions supply, and we will guarantee you safe conduct to the American border."

"I don't know anything about them," Joel said. By this time Coleman was well out of the town with the wagon and the powder. He had the feeling of being alone. Officially, there was no war between Santa Anna and his northern province, yet he was going to die. He'd killed Mexican soldiers; he'd broken the nose of a Mexican officer. Even now Armand had a white handkerchief up to his face, and his voice was muffled by it.

"You are a fool," Armand snapped. "You'll have the whole garrison down on your head."

The trapper laughed again. A man would be a fool to trust in the promises of the present Mexican officials. Even if he told about the munitions, Armand would have him shot. They were far from the States. He tried to stall for time because every minute was precious to Sam Coleman. The further they got from San Pablo with the supplies, the safer they would be.

"How do I know you'll release me?"

"Major Santara will give his word," Armand grated. "Is it not enough?"

"No," Joel told him. "I'd like a written promise from Santa Anna himself."

Armand swore in Spanish, knowing now that he was being made the fool. He called to his men and Joel's lips tightened.

"Get back," he ordered suddenly, "or I fire."

Armand started back quickly, still holding the handkerchief to his bleeding nose.

The mountain man heard the steps on the roof. He leveled the gun and fired. Someone quickly scrambled away. It was impossible to judge just where the Mexicans were, and he could not afford to waste shots on them. Undoubtedly, they had crept up to the rear of the building while he was talking with Lieutenant Armand.

He saved his fire, waiting for the troopers to make a break. Nothing happened.

Glancing out the window, Joel saw the light flicker on the road before him. He heard the crackle of flame above him. The roof of the adobe shack was on fire!

Grimly, Joel waited, wondering when he should make his break. Armand's troopers were spread out before him, forming a semi-circle in the buildings and alleys opposite him. They were waiting for him to come out, ready to shoot him down like a dog.

He listened to the flames crackling above him. Already it was getting hot as the dry roof boards were consumed. In a few minutes the whole structure would topple down on his head.

Bending low, he crossed the room to the door. He had the Colt filled and ready. There was a dark alley directly across the way. If he could get into that and knock down the men waiting for him, there was a possibility he could run to safety.

He realized, however, how small the chance was. The light from the fire on the roof illuminated the road in front of him. The moment he opened the door, they would begin to fire. If one bullet caught him in the leg, he would be through.

The Mexican troopers were all in darkness and there was only a slight chance of hitting them. He heard Lieutenant Armand's taunting voice. One corner of the roof started to sag. Burning brands fell to the floor.

Joel jerked open the door and leaped out.

He heard the quick clatter of horse's hoofs and saw the squadron of riders bearing down toward him. More reinforcements from the garrison!

A bullet smashed the adobe wall inches above his head. There was no chance to cross the road with this body of riders driving down at him. Joel lifted his weapon to fire at the lead rider. Then he heard Sam Coleman's stentorian voice:

"Don't shoot, trapper!"

Joel stared. The men on horseback were firing rapidly into the alleys and the windows as they came on. Sam Coleman rode in front of the column, a riderless horse with him.

"Git on," the fat man shouted, holding the reins down toward the mountain man. The other riders had formed a quick circle in front of him and were firing steadily.

Joel leaped onto the horse's back. Coleman shouted again, and the Texans sped away into the night. Joel saw one man sagging in the saddle. Another rider stayed with him to see that he did not fall.

"Did you get the powder and lead away?" Joel asked breathlessly. He noted there were about twenty men in the column—Texas militia.

"Everything's safe," Coleman grinned. "The wagon is near El Paso now and there are a hundred and fifty Texans there to take care of it. We're goin' there ourselves, but we thought we'd better bring you along, Brand."

"What about the families of these men?" Joel asked. "They'll be taken."

"They've been moved this afternoon," Coleman explained.

"Then it's war?" Joel asked.

"Santa Anna asked for it," Coleman said grimly. "He's getting it." The fat man paused. "Troops fired on Texans in Quintana yesterday. We just got word of it tonight. Even Austin thinks we'll have to fight now."

They rode on into the night. Joel Brand looked up into the sky. He glanced at the silent, grim-faced men around him. There was a single star in the sky. It was an omen.

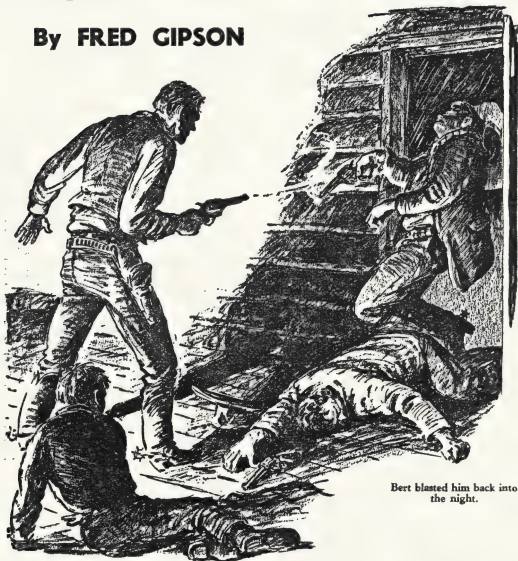
"The lone star," Sam Coleman muttered, "to guide the boys home."

"The lone star for Texas," Joel Brand said.

THE END

Orphans of the Owlhoot

By FRED GIPSON



Bert blasted him back into the night.



By siding an orphan kid and his poke of gold, Bert Fowler made himself live bait for the wolves of the San Saba owlhoot.



NIGHT was coming on when they put their dead-beat horses into the rough Calf Creek Crossing on the San Saba. An icy wind shrieked through the buroaks and pecans beside the river. Driving sleet stung their ears and rattled against their ice-incrusted slickers. It was bitter weather, cold and bleak—but nothing compared to the cold, bleak dread that filled Bert Fowler's belly.

Back yonder at Coleman Town lay a dead bank teller. And somewhere along

their backtrail, not too far behind, rode a grim posse.

But all Bert Fowler could think of was the wild terror in that bank teller's eyes just before Rob Gurkett's bullet had knocked the lights out of them.

Bert Fowler pulled up on the south bank of the river and angrily watched Rob Gurkett viciously spur-goad his mount through the tricky shoals. Finally Rob Gurkett's horse floundered up the river bank and stood spraddle-legged, his head drooping, flanks heaving and quivering. The big outlaw caught a glimpse of the anger and disgust in Bert Fowler's gray eyes.

"All right, kid," Gurkett rasped. "So you don't like the rough way I play. Maybe you know more about handling a bank job?"

"You didn't need to have kilt that teller!" said Bert Fowler. "He was just fumbling because he was scared."

"Fumbling, hell! He knowed that the sheriff and them pool-room deputies was headed for the bank."

"It never got us the money!" flared Bert Fowler. "All it done was bring the law down on us all the quicker."

The big outlaw evaded that. "Listen, kid," he said. "If you aim to play this game, you can't git chicken-hearted about baby-faced bank tellers. Them ducks sure hate to lose a dollar after they've gone to the trouble of skinning some pore devil out of it. They'll kill a man quick over a dollar—same as me."

He touched spurs to his jaded mount and moved into the ice-wrapped timber. "We made a slip-up back yonder. That's in the game, too. So what the hell? We'll shake this pack of John Laws tonight. Then we'll locate us another bank and raise our git-away stake, just like we planned."

Silently, Bert Fowler followed. His slight frame shivered under his slicker. Maybe that shiver was from the cold—or maybe it was from taking a look into the future.

The icy wind howled through the trees, dismal as the dying wail of a hunger-gaunted wolf. Hard-driven snowflakes began to swirl. Bert Fowler shivered again. Then he set his teeth with an audible click and his eyes hardened.

If that's the way the future had to be—then that's the way it had to be! How in

the hell could a little old picayune orphan kid like he'd been expect to kill off a big Texas rancher and get justice? Nobody had raised a row when Lige Prichard sent hired guns to bushwhack a nester with the audacity to file on range the big cattelman claimed by Winchester rights. They'd just waited till the nester's fifteen-year-old kid had paid off that killing with hot lead. Then everybody in the country had reared up in a big lather about the cold-blooded killing. They'd put the owlhoot brand on Bert Fowler then, hunted him like a killer wolf.

That had been five years ago, and they still hunted him. He was alive today, only because he'd outgrown the kid face that appeared on the dodgers.

Fowler and Gurkett climbed slowly out of the canyon. They topped out a high cat-claw ridge where the whooping wind tore at their clothing. Out of the deep header draw below the sound of rifle fire beat toward them.

"Guns!" exclaimed Rob Gurkett and pulled his mount back off the top of the ridge. He looked at Bert Fowler and his lips flattened. "None of our business."

THEY rode west, off down the slant where they couldn't be skylined, till they reached a patch of cedar. Behind this, they circled the sound of the guns. They rode slowly and cautiously, their red-rimmed eyes probing the gloom. The cedar-crested ridge ran parallel to the gutted rock draw and would shield them from discovery till they were past the ruckus.

The guns spoke and the wailing wind snatched the sound away. Bert Fowler couldn't tell much about what was going on. He said to Rob Gurkett: "Maybe you're right, Rob. Maybe a man's a damn fool to worry about the other feller."

Rob Gurkett lifted a shaggy eyebrow and grinned. "You're catching on, kid."

Down below, the gunfire died out. Some poor devil had got his, Bert Fowler figured, then tried to shrug it off.

The cedar-combed ridge slanted down, flattened where thickets of live-oak grew beside a twisting, dry-water course. Two startled wild turkeys rounded one of the thickets at a saddle-horse trot. They sighted the riders and whipped themselves into the air on heavy wings.

Bert Fowler said: "Hold it, Rob!" He

fumbled under his slicker for his gun.

The big outlaw pulled up. The wind moaned. The horses stood humped with cold and weariness, sleet stabbing at their rumps.

Then the wind whipped away the swirling snowflakes and the outlaws saw two figures stumbling toward them, vague in the gray gloom. One was a man, the other a boy. The man staggered under heavy saddlebags he packed across his shoulder. He fell and cried out and the boy turned to him. The man struggled desperately, trying to rise then slumped back.

Bert Fowler giggled his horse forward and swung down stiffly. He reached for the fallen man, then swore and slapped at a six-shooter the other tried to point at him. The gun flew to one side and Bert Fowler straightened, slinging his hand and grunting with pain. Tears stung his eyes from the hurt of slapping that gun with his cold hand.

"The money!" grunted the man.

Rob Gurkett was out of his saddle now, bending over the fallen man. "Shot all to hell," he said.

Bert Fowler saw the blood then. The shirt of the grizzly man was soaked with it. He saw the man's eyes glazing over.

"Little Joe—" gasped the man, then slumped forward on his face.

Rob Gurkett dragged the saddlebags from the man's shoulder. He lifted a flap and looked in and his yellow-flecked eyes widened. "This is what we been after!" he said gloatingly. "Big money, kid. Let's haul our freight out of here!"

Bert Fowler glanced toward the boy who had shrunk against the brush. He was a stringy little youngster, about ten maybe, lost in a bundle of ragged clothes that had once belonged to a man. Brown eyes, wide with terror, stared out from under a battered hat. His face was thin and pinched with cold.

Bert Fowler motioned toward him but the frightened boy made no move to come to him.

Gurkett stepped forward. "Let's go, kid."

The terror gripping the youngster broke over. "My daddy! What about my daddy!"

"He's dead, son," said Bert Fowler gravely. "There ain't nothing we can do for him now. We got to hurry!" He reached to put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

The youngster jerked away, yelling: "But we can't leave him! We can't leave my daddy out here in the cold!"

Rob Gurkett growled impatiently. "We got to git, Bert!"

"We're taking the kid," said Bert Fowler.

"What the hell! We got no time to mess with a kid."

Bert Fowler stiffened, his cold gray eyes locking with those of the big outlaw. "Then we'll take time!" he said flatly. "I ain't forgot when I had to leave my daddy laying out in the cold!" There was a raw edge to his voice that cut through the brag and bluster of the big outlaw.

Rob Gurkett didn't like the hard shine in his small partner's eyes nor the way he'd drawn his hand back under his slicker. Rob Gurkett had seen Bert Fowler use that cedar-handled six-shooter he packed—and the big man didn't want to try matching it. He shrugged.

"All right!" he growled. "I messed up the bank job. Reckon it's your turn now. But when your horse plays out under a double load, I aim to keep riding. Just recollect that!"

"Them ain't," said Bert Fowler dryly, "exactly duck feathers in them bags you just hung behind your saddle."

He reached down and lifted the sobbing child. "It's bad, son," he said softly, "but it can't be helped. We got to ride." He boosted the boy into the saddle and swung up behind.

THE blizzard was a howling black fury when they rode up to the cabin a couple of hours later. They couldn't have found it if Bert Fowler hadn't known every cow trail, almost every rock and bush. He couldn't see the cabin when he swung off the trail, but he knew where it stood—a sturdy little one-room shack whose every log and rock stirred an aching memory in his heart.

"We'll turn off and hole up here a spell," he told Rob Gurkett. "The boy's freezing."

"Damn the boy!" burst out Rob Gurkett. "We need to make tracks, Fowler. We hole up here, and the law'll ride onto us. Or that money-huntin' bunch what murdered the old man!"

"We'll take our chances," said Bert Fowler.

"Dammit, kid," flared the big outlaw. "What's got into you? We've got our stake, right here in these saddlebags. We can stand a little cold to be out of the country by daylight. We'd be fools to take chances now."

"Then I ain't taking none, Rob," said Bert Fowler. "I've got a gun drawn on you, just to make sure. Now drag your cutter, or swing off to the left. The kid's freezing. I aim to warm him!"

For a long moment they faced each other in the gathering darkness. Bert Fowler could feel the boy's uncontrollable shaking against his clasp arm. Then, without a word, Rob Gurrkett swung off toward the cabin. Bert Fowler followed, wondering if he could have pulled a trigger with his cold-stiffened finger.

The squat cabin crouched against the south side of a high limestone ledge like a fat bear hunting shelter. Where the ledge broke the force of the wind, Rob Gurrkett swung down.

"You'll likely find wood," Bert Fowler told him, "out yonder under them live-oaks. Bring in a batch while I git the kid inside."

"Just walk right off and leave you with them saddle-bags, I reckon," Rob Gurrkett sneered.

"That's right," said Bert Fowler. "I'll handle the saddlebags, Rob."

The big outlaw paused there beside his horse, his bony face an indistinct blur in the darkness. "Kid," he said finally, "it looks like you're calling for a showdown!"

Bert Fowler held his gun rock-steady while he let the shivering boy slip out of the saddle. The boy's numb legs couldn't bear his weight and he slumped.

"Any time you're ready, Rob," Bert Fowler invited.

Rob Gurrkett turned his back. "I reckon we might could wait till we git a fire started."

"It's a cold night—" Bert Fowler agreed—"for gitting shot!"

He waited till the big man had faded into the darkness. Then he reached for his catch-rope and dismounted. He lifted the saddle-bags from Rob Gurrkett's horse and a moment later had disappeared into the darkness behind the cabin.

When he came back, he carried the boy inside. He put him in a corner, tucked a horse-warmed saddle blanket around him and was splitting kindling when Rob Gurrkett came staggering in with an armload of wood. The big outlaw let the wood fall to the floor with a crash, and then straightened.

Bert Fowler arranged the splinters in the fireplace the best he could in the darkness. With numb hands, he stuck a match to them. The flame caught and a tiny blaze began to shove back the night. He turned to reach for heavier wood and looked into the bore of Rob Gurrkett's .44 six-shooter. The big outlaw had his long teeth bared in an evil grin.

"What's to keep me," he wanted to know, "from shooting you and the kid and pulling out with the take?"

"Why," said Bert Fowler mildly, "there ain't nothing, Rob. Excepting the money. You can't find the money if I'm dead."

The big outlaw's eyes flickered, then steadied. "I'd like to know," he said, "where you could of hid them pouches that quick that I couldn't find 'em. Anyway, come daylight."

SEEING-BELIEVING

THIRST-RELIEVING

What happens when you look at the circles
and move your head from side to side?



The circles spin like a wheel.



Bert Fowler reached for the wood and began to stack it on the fire. "I bet you would, Rob," he said. "I bet you'd give a purty to know."

THE flames mounted slowly. Bert Fowler waved his cold hands through them, then tucked them under his armpits and stood up, facing his partner. Rob Gurrkett still held the gun on him but the mounting firelight revealed his indecision.

"Tuck in your shirttail, Rob," Bert Fowler said. "I'm holding the whip hand and you know it. Go put them horses in out of the weather, while I thaw out the kid. When that's done, maybe we can come to some sort of understanding."

Rob Gurrkett slowly holstered his six-shooter. "You're gnawing on a mighty big bone, kid—when you start double-crossing Rob Gurrkett."

"Might be," said Bert Fowler, "this ain't a double-cross, Rob. Bring in that grub sack off my saddle when you come in."

He went to the boy, picked him up, blanket and all, and carried him to the fire. The kid was still shivering and sobbing quietly.

"Take it easy, kid," Bert Fowler comforted. "We'll warm up and eat a snack and feel better."

After the kid managed to gulp down a couple of bites of hot biscuits and bacon, his shivering stopped. Then he ate ravenously. He talked, finally, after Bert Fowler had led him with a few casual questions. His talk was disconnected, all mixed up with his grief and fear, but Bert Fowler finally figured he had the straight of it.

Best he could make it out, the kid's daddy had taken that gold off Tooter Prichard in a stud-poker game at Mason. Tooter Prichard had run onto them in town, where the kid's daddy, Big Joe Bailey, had come, trying to raise cow-feed money to see his outfit through the winter. That was because in the fall, after it was too late for grass to come, Tooter Prichard and a bunch of his tough saddle hands had thrown a big herd of Prichard cattle on Big Joe Bailey's little spread up on Calf Creek, grazing it to the turf.

There in town, Tooter had badgered the old man into a poker game, aiming to win his little outfit and get him out of the

country. But the scheme had backfired. Bailey had had a run of luck that Tooter Prichard couldn't match.

Bailey won more money than he'd ever hoped to get his hands on, then wanted to pull out of the game. Tooter Prichard had raised a fuss, claiming Bailey was cheating—so Bailey had taken his winning at the point of a gun.

He and Little Joe had pulled out for home then, aiming to pack up and quit the country. But Tooter Prichard and his bunch had taken their trail. And the running gun-fight that followed had wound up back yonder, with Joe Bailey shot off his horse and dying and Little Joe's horse shot out from under him.

The kid was crying again by the time he'd finished. Bert Fowler pulled him back into the corner and wrapped the blanket around him. Then he sat beside the boy, with a comforting arm across the quivering shoulders. Bert Fowler was recollecting the time when Tooter Prichard's father had had his own dad bushwhacked, just to get his greedy hands on their little spread here. It looked like the same blood was in Lige Prichard's son.

The wild wind tore at the split-shingled roof. It hooted and howled around the chimney corners. Rob Gurrkett rolled himself a stinky wisp of a cigarette. His voice had a raw, ugly edge to it.

"I reckon now," he said to Bert Fowler, "you're fixing to turn Santa Claus and let the kid keep the swag."

Bert Fowler smiled faintly. "It's an idee, Rob. It's been a long time since Santa Claus showed up on this range."

He kept staring at the fire. He was thinking about the gold and how bad he needed it. He didn't know how much the saddlebags contained but he was willing to bet that, split three ways, his share would still be enough to get him set for life somewhere south of the Rio Grande. He was willing to bet, also, that nothing short of a two-way split—leaving the kid out cold—would satisfy Rob Gurrkett.

And all the time he was thinking this, there was a voice in the back part of his mind telling him that neither he nor Rob Gurrkett had a right to touch that money. It belonged to the kid. He was an orphan now and, if turned out to shift for himself, the way Bert Fowler had been, he'd

likely drift into the same cold-blooded business. . . .

TOOTER PRICHARD and his tough hands rode up to the cabin about midnight. The sound of their voices awoke Bert Fowler, where he slept with his chin on the boy's head. He hadn't meant to sleep, but the warm fire in the chimney and the grub in his belly had been too much after that cold ride. He came to, with the sound of stomping horses and the rumble of low voices in his ears. The door was shut. Rob Gurkett was gone!

That brought him out of it, wide awake. He shifted the sleeping boy from his lap onto the floor and drew his six-shooter. He rose quietly, cursing himself for letting sentiment trap him. Thawing out the freezing kid was well and good. But going to sleep—that was a greenhorn trick.

He froze in his tracks and a slow chill crept down his spine. That was Rob Gurkett's voice out there now. Gurkett, telling this renegade bunch how he'd been double-crossed and was willing to throw in with them for a share. Telling them a sleeping man and boy ought to be easy for a bunch this size.

For the first time since he'd thrown in with Rob Gurkett, Bert Fowler realized that the big braggart bank robber was not only a cold-blooded killer but a coward, to boot.

He heard a startled grunt outside the door. A man's voice lifted above the whine of the wind. "What the hell, Tooter? Maybe he knowed where the money was hid!"

"If that blow-hard rat will double-cross a partner," said a brutal voice, "what's to keep him from giving us the runaround? That's just one out of circulation, the way I figure it. Come on and watch for a trap."

The heavy door burst open. Bert Fowler stepped toward it, his six-shooter spouting flame and rocking the cabin with its roar.

The first man to go down was a tall, lanky rider. He bent double with a slug in his belly. A blocky little rider with a thundering six-shooter shoved the tall man aside. Bert Fowler's second bullet caught the short rider in the chest, knocking him back out the door. Bert heard Little Joe Bailey's wild scream of terror.

Still triggering, Bert Fowler walked out the door, into the hell of lead they jabbed at him. He stepped down on something that gave under his foot and heard a fallen man grunt. Then his head seemed to explode in a flare of pinwheeling lights. He felt himself sinking into a deep well of whirling darkness.

He couldn't have been out long, because the cold hadn't yet stiffened his fingers. He rolled over and sat up. His mind went momentarily blank again at the splitting pain in his head. He lifted a hand and found the bullet burn across the top of his head. Then he tried hard and managed to focus his eyes on the open door of the cabin.

Inside, the chimney fire lit up the figures of two men. They stood with their backs



toward him. Both were big men but something about the set of one's shoulders seemed familiar. Then Bert Fowler realized he was looking at Tooter Prichard. Tooter was built like his father—mentally and physically.

Tooter Prichard held a quirt in one hand, flicking it against his bullhide chaps. "Come across, kid," he urged. "Tell us where that money's hid. The next time I'll lay this quirt on a damned sight harder!"

Bert Fowler couldn't see Little Joe Bailey, but he could hear the kid's sobbing. "I tell you I didn't see where he hid it," the kid cried out.

The second man said: "Looks like we played hell, Tooter. We hadn't oughta kilt that second bird till we found out."

"Like to know what the hell else we

could a-done!" snarled Tooter Prichard. "With him coming at us hog-wild with that six-shooter. I'll git it out of this kid yet. He knows. He's just like his old man—mule-headed. I'll cut him to pieces or git it out of him!"

A HOT killing rage flared in Bert Fowler. He fumbled at his belt for cartridges. Back-shooting a man wasn't his way to play the game, but right now he reckoned he'd toss the rules to the wind. If Tooter Prichard raised that quirt to the kid again, he'd get his backbone split with a bullet—if Bert Fowler could shoot that straight.

"I'm warning you, kid," Tooter Prichard said hoarsely. "This is your last chance!"

Bert Fowler felt his lips peeling back from his teeth in a snarl of hate.

That's when he saw the slight movement at the steps, then the silhouette of a man's head rising in the doorway. Hunched shoulders rose to block the light. Bert Fowler sucked in a quick breath and held it. He didn't have to look twice to recognize that figure. That was Rob Gurkett crawling into that room.

But what had taken Bert Fowler's breath was sight of that big knife handle sticking up out of Rob Gurkett's back.

For the space of several seconds, Bert Fowler forgot that he was in a hurry to get his six-shooter loaded. He just sat and stared at his big outlaw partner.

The set-up was easy to read. Somebody had driven that knife to the hilt in Rob Gurkett's back outside the door before the fracas had started. "Getting one of 'em out of circulation," Tooter Prichard had said. But Rob Gurkett, coward and brag that he was, was a hard man to kill. He'd lain out there in the dark, waiting his chance for revenge. He hadn't withdrawn that deadly blade for fear he'd lose too much blood before he got a break. Somehow, he'd managed to slip off his boots. And now he was closing in for the kill—creeping in as silent and deadly as a stalking catamount.

The fascinating horror of the thing gripped Bert Fowler and held him still.

Rob Gurkett crossed the floor and came slowly to his feet behind the renegade rancher, reaching back over his shoulder for the handle of that big knife. His shad-

ow rose on the wall before him and Tooter Prichard's gun-dog wheeled suddenly.

"Look out, Tooter!" he shouted and grabbed for his gun.

Tooter Prichard wheeled, dropping his quirt and snatching at his gun. With a savage cry, Rob Gurkett wrenched the knife from his back. He swung the bloody blade above his head, then drove it to the hilt into Tooter Prichard's throat.

The rancher reeled, clawing at the knife. The gun in the hands of the other man barked. Rob Gurkett staggered sideways, as if struck with a sledgehammer. He hit the floor like a pole-axed steer, almost before Tooter Prichard.

Bert Fowler heard Little Joe Bailey's piercing scream and saw the kid dart across the room. The lone gunman reached out and caught the kid by the neck, slamming him against the wall. Bert Fowler came to life. He snapped the loaded cylinder of his gun back into place and cut down on the remaining gunman without warning. He let the big man have two slugs dead center in the chest. Then he stayed there on his knees and watched the man crumple to the floor.

It took a long time to quiet Little Joe Bailey after the shooting was done. The terror he'd experienced in the last few hours had the boy almost in hysterics. When at last, Bert Fowler held the sobbing youngster in his arms, he looked to where Rob Gurkett lay in the middle of the floor. He found the big outlaw's eyes on him, pain-filled but clear.

"They git you, Rob?" he asked, moving closer.

Rob Gurkett closed his eyes. "Shot my whole damned belly off," he said hoarsely. "Reckon I was askin' for it, all along!"

Bert Fowler watched the features of the big man's face twisting in agony. He wanted to say something. Seemed like there ought to be something a man could say. But he didn't know what.

Rob Gurkett's eyes opened again. He saw the look on his partner's face and his lips flattened in a faint smile.

"What I'd give a purty to know," he whispered, "is where you hid them saddlebags!"

Bert Fowler swallowed, staring at the man. "Why," he said, finally, "I tied 'em to the end of my catch-rope, Rob, and hung

'em down a dry well Pa had drilled back of the house. Pa figured because there was a seep spring in them limestone rocks, there, he could git artesian water if he drilled deep. Aimed to irrigate him an alfalfa patch. So he spent the last dollar he had on drilling—and got a dry hole. So we covered it with a slab of limestone rock to keep a cow or horse from stepping into it. I tied a stick to my catch-rope and—"

He broke off suddenly, with the queer foolish feeling of a man caught talking to himself. Rob Gurrkett was dead.

Outside, the howl of the blizzard was dying to a low moan. Bert Fowler picked out and saddled the best two horses in the outfit then went back into the cabin.

"Look, Joe!" he said to the boy. "I've got to move and move fast. You got folks around here to see after you?"

The boy shook his head.

Bert Fowler swore under his breath. That left it squarely up to him. There wasn't a thing now to keep him from hauling his freight south with those saddlebags of gold. He could be across the Rio Grande in less than a weeks' ride—safe in Mexico. With no worries!

Except a little old stringy orphan kid whose dead daddy lay back yonder in the cold because there was nobody to bury him!

It was a big temptation to Bert Fowler. Harder to fight than he'd thought a thing

like that would be. Finally, he asked: "What'd your pa aim to do with that money, Joe?"

"Said we'd pull for Montana or some place," said little Joe, "and buy us a ranch. Buy lots of fine cattle."

Bert Fowler studied on that a moment, then shot a sharp glance at the kid. "Look, Joe. I'm an outlaw. I've stole horses and cattle. I come damned nigh robbing you. If you had you a good cow ranch, would you hire an outlaw to run it? At, say, about forty-a-month and found?"

He stood before the frank, searching gaze the kid turned on him and felt himself stripped naked by the look.

"You got any folks?" Little Joe asked. "You got any daddy or mama?"

Bert Fowler shook his head. "I got nobody, kid."

Little Joe Bailey's eyes probed him again. "Well," he said finally, "us orphans ought to stick together. Don't you reckon?"

Bert Fowler felt as if a hangnoose had suddenly been lifted from around his neck. His throat was choky and he didn't quite know what to do next.

Then he reached for a spare saddle blanket and started wrapping the kid in it.

"All right, Joe," he said. "It's a bad time of the year to head north—but come on. "You've hired you a ramrod for the best Montana cow outfit a saddle-bag of gold can buy!"

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By MORGAN LEWIS

CHAPTER ONE

Strangers Not Wanted

A TALL, thin kid pushed through the batwings of the dingy saloon and came to a stop before the bar. The bartender slid a glass and bottle to him and the kid laid a silver dollar on the bar top and poured a drink.

Down at the end of the bar a heavy-set man with iron-gray hair was talking to a wizened, bowlegged puncher.

The bartender put the kid's change on the bar.

"Who's that?" The tall kid jerked his head at the two men.

"You must be new," the bartender observed. "That's Mal Stevens, owner of Quarter Circle S, and his ramrod, Gus Ivey."

The kid picked up his drink and walked down to the two men. Mal Stevens broke off his talk and the two stared at the kid without friendliness.

"Mister," said the kid, directing his talk

to the heavy-set Mal Stevens, "I'm lookin' for a job. You need a hand?"

Mal Stevens was by nature a kindly man but events were crowding him and he had no time to waste on an unknown, fiddle-footed kid. "See me when you've done growin'," he said bruskiy, and turned his attention to Ivey.

The kid stood silent for a space before he remarked matter-of-factly, "I reckon I've quit growin'. I'm most twenty."

Stevens shot a glance from under heavy brows to see if he was being hoorawed but the kid's long face was perfectly serious. "You from around these parts?"

The kid shook his head. "I come from down trail—Texas."

"We don't like strangers around here," Stevens said pointedly, and poured himself a drink.

The kid hung irresolute; the five silver dollars in his pocket were heavy but they wouldn't take him far. He needed a job bad. "We'll always be strangers," he said, "if you act thataway." His face was still long and serious but this time Stevens was sure his leg was being pulled. Red crept into his jowls.

"We hire only tophands on Quarter Circle S," he said with finality. He finished his drink and tramped from the barroom. Gus Ivey gave the boy a long, frosty look and followed his boss through the batwings.

The tall kid turned back to the bar. "Friendly, ain't they?"

The bartender spread his palms on the bar's smooth top. "What's your name, son?"

"Johnny—Johnny Burrel."

The man poured a drink and shoved it to him. "Here's one on the house and I'll give you a little advice to go with it. You get on your horse and ride back to Texas where you come from. All hell is due to bust loose around here and it ain't no place for a stranger to go wanderin' around."

Johnny tossed down his drink and shudered. "Meanin' what?"

"Some slick gents has been throwin' a wide loop," the bartender said, "and they ain't too particular whose cattle it catches." He paused. "That's why it ain't healthy for strangers."

"Shucks," Johnny said, "I never stole no cattle."

"Maybe not, but if any of these cattlemen was to catch you rammin' around the country you'd have to prove it—if you aimed to stay healthy."

Johnny jingled the few dollars in his pocket. If he left this high north country now and went back down-trail it meant riding the grub-line. Outside, the spring sunlight was bright and warm; soon it would be roundup time and the ranchers would be taking on hands. "I reckon I'll stay," he said.

The bartender shrugged resignedly and reached for a cigar. "It's fellers like you," he observed, "that keep time from draggin'."

Johnny grinned and went out.

CROW FORKS was a sad and dismal collection of some two dozen buildings sagging on either side of a rutted, dirt road. It took Johnny less than half an hour to make a tour of the town and decide there was no job here. He came back to his horse.

"Major," he said, "we got to travel around this country, hittin' one outfit after another, 'till we get somebody to give us a job."

Major rolled a jaundiced eye and shifted his weight to the other hip. In his day he had been a top cowpony, but that day was far behind him. Now he was gaunt and sour from age and hard work, and his viewpoint was all on the dark side of life. Johnny's outfit was wrapped in a tattered slicker and lashed to the back of the battered saddle.

Johnny put foot to stirrup and swung aboard, avoiding the shotgun stuck in the rifle boot. Then he rode out at the north end of town.

The road climbed almost imperceptibly, traveling up to a high and windy upland where it gradually lost itself in rank grass. Johnny shoved straight ahead for the purple hills that rose on the outmost rim of vision.

He stopped by a stream when the sun was straight overhead. He took the shotgun and used one shell to knock over a rabbit. He cooked it over a small fire and ate half, wrapping up the rest for supper.

Major continued to graze while Johnny had his after dinner smoke, and then they

were again traveling towards the purple hills.

By nightfall the country had become much rougher, the rolling land cut and gashed by ravines and dry gulches. Further on, it began to rise in a series of benches to the hills and Johnny judged it might be good country to winter cattle in but it sure would be hell to work at round-up time.

He camped by the side of a little stream, ate his cold rabbit and rolled up in a blanket with the tattered slicker under him to keep out the damp.

He didn't bother to tether Major. To the cross-grained old horse, one place was as bad as another—so why waste energy running away?

Johnny slept peacefully until something hard jammed him in the ribs. He sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes—and saw two leather-faced waddies watching him. One was astride a horse and the other was standing a few feet from Johnny's bedroll. In the gray light the trees along the stream looked weird and ghostly and there was an early morning chill in the air.

"What's your business and where you headed?" the man on the ground asked.

Johnny stretched and stood up. "Lookin' for work," he answered.

The two waddies looked at each other for a moment and then the man on the horse said, "You'd better come along with us—it might be the boss could use another hand."

"Sure thing," Johnny said with alacrity and bent over his bedroll. As he was making it up and lashing it behind the saddle, he noticed the two men watching him closely. When he was mounted and again riding north a waddie fell in on either side of him and he began to suspect that they would have brought him along, willing or not.

The two men were disinclined to talk, and after a couple of tries Johnny kept silent. The bartender's talk returned to him and he wondered if he had fallen in with some of the wide-loop artists.

They came to an upgrade and Major fell into his natural gait, a walk. As they climbed, the sun slid up into the sky, and when they topped the rise the brightness of a new day was all around them.

Johnny pulled up to give Major a breather. Before them the sloping ground ran

down into a green bowl-like valley, and sprawled in the center was a collection of ranch buildings.

The men fiddled impatiently in their saddles until Major's sides ceased their bellows-like movement. They started down and Johnny saw a rider coming hell-for-leather from the hills on the other side. The rider pulled up his horse in a swirl of dust before the bunkhouse. A minute later figures were swarming around him. A man came striding from the big house and joined the group.

The waddie on Johnny's right grunted, "Must be somethin' up." He touched spurs to his horse.

CHAPTER TWO

Sure Cure for Rustlers

THEY came through a gateway onto the hard-trampled dirt of the ranch yard and drew rein beside the group of men. A heavy set man in the center made a half turn to face them and Johnny recognized Mal Stevens.

The waddie on his right swung down and walked over to the ranchman. Johnny heard him say, "We found him camped across Pearl Creek—"

Mal Stevens listened and then came up to Johnny. He frowned up at the tall kid for a moment and then his face cleared. "I remember," he said. "You're the fresh kid that hit me up for a job." The frown came back to his face. "What are you doing on my range?"

"Still lookin' for a job," Johnny told him.

Stevens' eyes bored into Johnny and his voice became stern. "You'll have to do better than that. One of my hands was shot and killed last night. . . ."

Johnny felt the muscles of his face tighten. "It couldn'ta been me did it," he protested. "I don't pack a gun."

A red-faced, dust-grimed waddie pushed forward. "Lonny wasn't shot with a hogleg," he said, grief and a hard anger in his voice. "Some lowdown skunk got him from behind with a scattergun." He reached up and dragged Johnny's shotgun from its boot. He snapped it open and a spent shell dropped out.

An ominous silence settled on the crew of Quarter Circle S.

Johnny felt uneasy. "I used that shell to shoot a rabbit," he said, and his voice sounded strange in his ears.

The red-faced waddie holding the gun gave him a hard, close look. "And didn't even take time to reload?" he inquired sceptically.

Johnny shook his head. "Shells are too hard to come by. I never put in a fresh one 'till I aim to use it."

"To shoot another cowpoke in the back?" the waddie inquired grimly.

The bowlegged ramrod, Gus Ivey, squirted a stream of tobacco juice at the ground. "A length of rope will cure him of that habit."

Johnny rubbed moist palms on his levis. "These two fellers that brought me in will tell you that I was camped the other side of the creek." He swung his gaze to Mal Stevens. "You know I was in Crow Forks yesterday morning." He let his eyes drift around the circle and come to rest on the red-faced waddie holding the shotgun. "It took me all day to get to where I camped—how could I have shot your sidekick?"

The waddie thought a moment. "You coulda gone out and shot Lonny and had time to get back to the creek. How do we know which way you was headin'?"

"Hold on a minute," Mal Stevens said gravely. "We don't want to go off half cocked. How far out was Lonny when you found him, Curley?"

"Bout ten miles north," the waddie with the shotgun answered.

"Ten miles," mused Stevens, "and five miles to the creek makes fifteen. That'd be thirty miles round trip." He swung to one of the waddies who had brought Johnny in. "You reckon he coulda done it, Jim?"

"He could of," Jim said, "if he'd had a decent horse. But with that bag of bones—" he eyed Major and shook his head—"I reckon not."

Johnny felt the tightness leave his body; he drew a long breath and dragged a sleeve across his forehead.

Stevens looked at the waddie who had taken Johnny's shotgun. "That satisfy you, Curley?"

But Curley was only partly convinced. "Whoever shot Lonny," he said, "took his fancy gun. You mind if I look through your bedroll?" he asked Johnny.

"Help yourself," Johnny said and

stepped from the saddle. He unlashed the roll and threw it on the ground.

Curley bent over and carefully went through its meager contents. He straightened up at last. "I reckon you're all right," he said heavily and shoved the shotgun into Johnny's hands. He pulled off his hat and slowly mopped his bald pate with a big bandanna.

As Johnny was repacking his bedroll, Mal Stevens stepped up to him. "I don't reckon you shot Lonny," he said, "but it's damn funny how you happened to come straight out here. Whoever done the shoot-in' run off a bunch of my cow critters. I aim to take their trail. You better come along so's I can keep an eye on you 'till we get this cleaned up."

Stevens swung around to the two waddies who had brought Johnny in. "Jim, you and Idaho go on up to the house and get some breakfast. Soon as you're finished we'll get started." He turned back to Johnny. "You might as well go along with 'em. No sense in you starvin'."

Johnny followed them up to the rambling white house and into the built-on kitchen at the end. It was a big room with a huge wood stove backed against one wall and beside it the pump and sink. A long table ran down the center of the room with chairs scattered about it. At the opposite end was a big wooden dresser holding plates, cups and saucers.

Cooking utensils were hung on nails driven into the wall behind the stove and there was a warm, pleasant odor of food in the air.

As Johnny went in, a girl about a year or so younger than he, turned from the stove. The heat had put deep pink into her cheeks and her eyes were a deep gray. Her hair was light and curled about her forehead. Johnny suddenly knew with a mighty leap of his heart that here was the one place above all others where he wanted to work.

"Allie," Jim said, "this here is—" he broke off and turned to Johnny. "Say, what is your name?"

Johnny kept his eyes on the girl's face. "Johnny Burrel—from Texas."

She gave Johnny a wide-eyed, appraising look and turned back to the stove as though satisfied with what she had seen.

"You can wash up at the sink," she directed, "and sit down. There are plenty of flapjacks left."

Johnny took his turn with the basin and roller towel. He slicked back his hair with water and a comb he found in a rack beneath the mirror, and sat down next to Jim. Allie put a platter of flapjacks on the table and poured cups of black coffee.

Johnny stacked flapjacks on his plate and reached for the molasses. . . .

FIFTEEN minutes later he shoved back his chair to tailor a smoke, a sense of well-being filling him. It had been many days since he had eaten a meal like that.

Allie regarded his empty plate with an expression of satisfaction and smiled at him. Johnny grinned back at her and took the first drag of his cigarette. Right then he wouldn't have traded places with anyone. Somehow, he just had to get Mal Stevens to hire him.

The cowpuncher called Jim wiped his mouth and stood up. He spoke for the first time since the meal had started. "Time to go. The boss'll be waitin'."

Johnny got reluctantly to his feet. "That was a right good meal," he said by way of thanks.

"Glad you like it," Allie replied. "Did Pop hire you?"

Johnny shook his head and his sense of well-being evaporated. "No," he said dejectedly. "He says I'm a fiddle-footed kid."

Allie's eyes crinkled faintly at the corners. "I don't know about you're being fiddle-footed but you look tall and tough enough to me."

"I wish your pop thought so," Johnny said, and followed Jim and Idaho outside.

Down at the corral, Mal Stevens and Curley were already mounted and waiting. Johnny climbed onto Major's back. Jim and Idaho led out their horses and swung up.

Mal Stevens kneeed his bay gelding over beside Johnny's mount. "The way things is now," he said, "you'll have to stick with us 'till we find out if you're tied up with

these wide-loop boys or not. When we catch up with them, if they give you a clean bill of sale, you'll be free to ride on."

Johnny nodded soberly and fell in behind Stevens as he wheeled the gelding and rode out. *It was the hell of a note*, he thought, *to have his life depend on the word of a rustler.*

Mal Stevens headed for a long, black ridge that thrust sharply into the grass land. Behind it the hills rose darkly, fold on fold.

Curley had fallen in beside Johnny and now he raised his hand and pointed to where the tip end of the ridge merged into the level land. "That's where I found Lonny," he said. "Him and me was side-kicks—worked together the last ten years." He looked sideways at Johnny. "You can't blame me for suspectin' you when I first seen that shotgun."

Johnny nodded. "I reckon it did look bad at first."

"Sure it did," Curley said as though to justify himself. "About that gun of Lonny's," he continued. "He won it at a shootin' match across the mountains and it sure was a beauty. Was Lonny proud of it!" He shook his head. "It was a double-action Colt .45 with a solid pearl handle and it hung as nice as anything you'd want to see." He sighed. "Lonny promised it to me if anything happened to him."

They forded a shallow, swiftly flowing stream and Major got into difficulties, having trouble making his legs behave in the swift current.

Stevens and the others waited on the opposite bank while Johnny carefully worked the old horse across. He reached the idle backwash at the edge and Major splashed through and came up the bank snorting.

Stevens gave him a disapproving look before he touched his bay with the spur and again led off. They rode over rough country to the tip of the ridge.

Curley swung down and pointed to a

Morgan Lewis, author of the story you are now reading, will be back next month with a thriller that is guaranteed to hold you to the last word. He calls it—"When Sioux Knives Were Thirsty." July 10 STORY WESTERN—on sale June 9th!

heap of rocks. "I didn't have no shovel when I found him—so I done the best I could." He unlashed a shovel from his saddle and set to work to dig a grave.

While Jim and Idaho rode out seeking the trail of the rustled cattle, Johnny dismounted and spelled Curley with the shovel. When a grave had been scooped out, they took the rocks from Lonny and laid him in it. Curley covered him with a blanket and they shoveled the dirt back in and heaped rocks over the mound.

Mal Stevens sat his bay, watching, with a face as hard and cold as granite.

Curley laid the shovel beside the fresh grave and straightened to wipe the sweat from his face. "I'll pick it up on the way back," he said.

Jim rode over and pulled in beside Stevens. "We found the trail. It leads straight back into the hills. Idaho's stickin' with it."

CHAPTER THREE

Water Barrier

THEY came upon Idaho sitting his horse impatiently across the trail. He pointed ahead to a gap in the swelling bulge of hills that reared blackly.

"They went through there," Idaho said. "There was three men drivin'."

Mal Stevens moved up beside him and squinted up the grade. "That'll slow 'em down."

The trail led upwards, becoming fainter as it climbed onto hard and rocky ground. They came into the gap and the hills rolled back on either side, steep and timbered.

Curley, riding in the rear with Johnny, muttered "Looks like a good place for a bushwhack trap."

Here in the gap the signs faded out altogether; but no cattle could have gone far up those steep, brush lined sides, so they must be ahead.

The upgrade bothered Major and, when the trail dipped for the descent on the other side, Johnny let him stop for a breather. Mal Stevens pulled his bay to one side. He said nothing but waited with black impatience on his face.

Johnny gave him one swift glance and knew he was further than ever from landing a job with the outfit. The thought de-

pressed him. He had seen enough to know that Stevens was a good man to work for. His crew liked and respected him, and he treated them with consideration and a friendly equality. The picture of the big, homelike kitchen and Allie returned to him. He kicked Major dejectedly in the ribs and followed down the sloping trail.

Occasionally, on patches of bare ground, they could see cattle tracks, but for the most part the descent was hard and stony. They rounded a bulge of rock and saw the ground fall away into a green, rolling valley some miles in extent with a stand of willow and cottonwood down the center. In open spaces between the trees was the distant flash of water.

"Roarin' Creek," Curley observed. He eyed Major and grinned. "You'll need a boat to get *him* across."

The little band rode down into the valley. Idaho suddenly pulled up and pointed to the ground. The rest bunched up behind and Johnny could see where the tracks of another herd joined the ones they were following.

Mal Stevens drew a little apart with Idaho and the two talked in low tones. Curley shifted his weight in the saddle and gazed down valley. "This here stretch," he said, "curves around this hump we just come over and lets out into Cross T range. It looks like these rustlers split up last night and some of 'em rounded up Cross T cattle while the rest was payin' us a visit."

Johnny studied the ground. "The bunch we're trailin' came along after the Cross T bunch," he said. "You can see where the tracks overlap."

Mal Stevens and Idaho walked their horses over to the riders. "There's five or six men ahead of us," Stevens said, his face grim, "maybe more. If we go for help they'll be out of reach when we get back. I'm for goin' ahead just like we are. Idaho says the tracks are so fresh they can't be much beyond Roaring Creek."

Jim's leathery brown face remained impassive. "Suits me."

"Let's get goin'!" Curley said savagely. "I want to get a shot at the bushwhackin' hombre that did for Lonny."

Stevens let his hard gaze rest on Johnny. "Curley will be alongside you," he warned. "If you try any tricks—you'll be in trou-

ble." He wheeled the bay and rode straight for Roaring Creek.

Johnny rode in the dust cloud kicked up by the horses ahead and for the first time he felt a stirring of anger against Mal Stevens. This was a free country; what right did this rancher have to brand him a rustler just because he happened to blunder onto his range?

Stevens was setting a fast pace and Johnny wondered if Major would last until they reached the creek. He felt sorry for the beating the old horse was taking.

Curley rode stirrup to stirrup with him and, despite his apparent friendliness, his hand never strayed far from his Colt.

A mile further on he saw the cattle tracks swing off to the right but Stevens held straight ahead.

Johnny swung his hand towards the tracks. "He's leavin' the trail," he said to Curley above the hammer of hoofs.

Curley shook his head. "Don't make no difference. There ain't but one trail out of this end of the valley and they've got to cross the creek to get to it."

Major was beginning to play out fast; he stumbled once or twice and his old sides were heaving. At the end of another mile, Stevens pulled up at the fringe of wood that bordered the creek. Johnny stepped from the saddle and ran his hand down the old horse's neck as Major stood with head dropped low to the ground, dead beat.

Mal Stevens looked at the horse, his face inscrutable. He rode over to Curley and spoke to him in a low tone. Curley nodded. Then Stevens signaled to Jim and Idaho. The three rode into the strip of woodland that screened Roaring Creek, leaving Curley with Johnny.

"Ain't you goin' with them?" Johnny asked in surprise.

Curley shook his head. "The river's too deep and swift right here for that crow-bait of yours. The boss wants us to go on up and hit the ford."

CURLEY and Johnny started up along the strip of woods, Curley riding and Johnny walking with the reins looped over his shoulder, and Major plodding behind him.

Off to the left they could hear the others going through the creek and then the pound of hoofs on dry ground. The sounds paral-

leled their own line of march on the other side of the creek, drawing ahead of them.

Suddenly the sounds stopped in a flurry of hoofs as though the horses had been abruptly reined in. Johnny heard voices, sharp and short.

Curley stopped his horse short and his face was suddenly hard and purposeful. "I reckon they've come up with 'em," he said. "Can you swim?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Then I reckon you'll stay here," Curley said. "The ford's a good two miles up and you can't go far on that cripple."

He touched spurs to his horse and disappeared among the trees.

Johnny stood there after Curley had gone, with Major's labored breathing loud in his ears. It must be pretty serious to make Curley disregard orders and leave him. He could hear Curley's horse as it went into the river but there were no sounds from the other side.

That was queer; if they had come up with the rustlers there ought to be shooting—unless the rustlers had got the drop on them. It couldn't be the other way around for Stevens and his crew were outnumbered two to one. Curley would be a help, if he didn't ride straight into a trap.

Johnny paced back and forth with short, jerky steps. His anger was evaporating before a feeling of concern. Allie was waiting back there in the big kitchen; it would break her all up if her pop didn't come back. Now that Stevens and his crew were in danger, Johnny found that he had a friendly feeling for them. He reckoned that the way things lay, Stevens had treated him pretty white. He could have tied him up and lugged him back to jail in Crow Forks, to be held until this rustling business had been cleaned up.

He paused beside Major and pulled shotgun shells from his bedroll. "If nobody will hire me," he told the horse, "I reckon I'll give myself a job." He tore off a piece of the ragged old slicker and put the shells into it, tying up the ends into a water-tight pouch.

He shoved it inside his shirt, took the shotgun from the boot and ran through the cottonwoods to Roaring Creek.

He paused for a moment before wading in over the shelving bank. The creek wasn't over fifty feet wide but, swollen by spring

rains, it rolled dark and smooth, save where water boiled whitely over surface rocks.

He went in and the ice-cold water surged around his legs, torturing his feet into cramps that shot clear to his hips. That was the river's first trick.

Johnny set his jaw and waded out into the current. The water rose past his knees and its chill went through his entire body. That river was born in the mountains and the icy coldness of springs was in it. Twenty feet from shore, when the water reached his hips, he realized for the first time the tremendous force of the river.

It pushed at him with a dark power that was like a live thing. He had edged out facing upstream, but now the force of the current swung him sideways to it and the pressure lessened.

Holding the shotgun sholder high, he forced out into the increasing depth, and the icy ripples about his middle checked the breath in his lungs like a blow under the heart. The river was really opening its bag of tricks now.

The cramps had left his feet and a numbness was creeping up his legs; he braced himself to get his breath and the current tore the sand from beneath his feet. Johnny wasn't used to water and a panicky fear began to rise in him. He gripped the gun and lurched ahead, breathing in short, hard gasps.

He reached the middle and the pressure of that living wall of water was almost more than he could stand. Braced slantwise against it, his body vibrated like a taut bow string. It was up to his armpits now, curling into white ripples where it struck his body, a vicious, living power that strove unceasingly to sweep him from his feet.

He took a step forward and the river, with malignant cunning, placed a hole for his struggling feet.

Johnny went down, and the shock of the icy water over his head drove all thought from his mind. In blind, unreasoning panic, he was picked up and hurled downstream. He swallowed water and then his head came out into the air. At the same time his feet touched an elevation in the river bed and he was able to stand.

For a long moment he was only able to brace himself against the pull while he blew the water from mouth and nose. He was

past the middle now and the other bank didn't seem too far away. He started edging for it and felt the ground begin to rise under his feet.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell on Roaring Creek

WHEN at last he got his breath and staggered up the bank, the first thing he did was break the gun, to see if the barrel was clear, and slip in shells. Then he started moving up through the trees, his soaked clothing stuck tight to his angular body and his boots squishing at every step. His body felt on fire after its icy bath and needle points of flame pricked at his legs.

A hundred feet further on he heard voices and worked his way through the underbrush with more caution. With the voices to guide him he finally came to a stop behind a clump of young growth. Before him, Mal Stevens and his crew faced six mounted men. One of them, slightly in advance, was talking. Johnny saw a star badge pinned to his shirt.

He was a big man with a smooth, reddish brown face and a nose that curved like a beak. He had evidently been arguing with Stevens, for his face looked grim and angry. Stevens was staring at him with his jaw set like granite.

"It looks bad, Stevens," the man with the badge was saying, "to find you and your crew here with Cross T stock."

"Look here, Babson," Stevens said with angry impatience, "I've just told you we were trailing a bunch of our own stock. The sooner you quit this damn foolishness and get after the men who stole these herds the sooner you'll break up the rustlin' that's been goin' on around here!"

Johnny let his eyes drift to the men backing the big sheriff. They were a hard-case crew if he had ever seen one and they were eyeing Stevens and his men with a hard impatience, as though all this talk served no purpose at all.

The chill of the river was still in Johnny's bones and he shivered and set his teeth to keep them from chattering.

Babson rubbed big fingers over his lean jaw. "That may be so," he said with a show of reasonableness. He paused, "But it's an old trick, driving a bunch of your own stock across a trail to blot it. . ."

Johnny took a deep breath and felt some of the tension leave him. These men weren't rustlers; they were a sheriff's posse. Even if Stevens gave himself up and went back to Crow Forks with them, he would be able to clear himself. There wasn't much chance that Babson could make a rustling charge stick, not after Lonny had been killed trying to save the herd.

Stevens' heavy jowls purpled with anger. "Keep a curb on your tongue, Babson," he warned. "I never stole any man's cattle!"

Curley and the rest of the crew were ranged behind Stevens, their faces carefully expressionless but their eyes alert and watchful.

Babson shrugged. "Here's your cattle mixed in with Cross T stock," he pointed to the upper end of the valley, "and all of them headed for the hills. There's no sign of any rustlers—just you and your crew. What am I goin' to think?"

He let his eyes range over the faces of the Quarter Circle S crew as though seeking their understanding. "You can see how things are," he said gravely. "I've got to take you in. If you can prove you're innocent, we'll come back here and trail those rustlers from hell to breakfast!"

That's fair enough, Johnny reasoned, standing behind the brush. If he believes what he's sayin' he's only doin' what he's got to do.

Babson was wearing a corduroy coat, unbuttoned and with the right side swung back behind his gun handle, but he made no move towards it as he kned his horse closer to Stevens.

"You'll have to give me your hardware," he said, not threatening but as a matter of fact. His hat was shoved back and the sun was shining full on his smooth, serious face.

One of the men behind him slid a hand to his gun butt and Babson caught the move from the tail of his eye. He jerked his head around to face the man. "None of that, Luke!" he said sharply. "There'll be no shootin'! Mal and his crew will give up their guns peaceable and go back to town with us."

The man dropped his hand from his hip and Babson turned back to Stevens. He held out his hand. "Give me your gun, Mal."

Stevens looked at him for a long moment of absolute silence. His eyes drifted from

Babson to range along the hard-case crew lined up in back of the sheriff, and his face became bleak.

"I reckon," he said grudgingly, "there's no other way out." His hand moved slowly to his hip.

THE two cow ponies were about three feet apart and Babson leaned sideways in his saddle to span the distance. As he did so, his coat hiked up on the left side, the side away from Stevens, and something gleamed, bright and iridescent in the hot sunlight.

For a split second Johnny stared at it uncomprehendingly; then his breath caught in his chest as full realization shocked him like a dash of cold water in his face.

"Don't do it!" he yelled and crashed forward through the brush.

The men, cowpokes and posse alike, stiffened in startled attention. Mal Stevens froze with his hand almost to his gun. Babson jerked around in the saddle, his eyes wild and keen as a hawk's.

Johnny kicked through the last of the brush. He stepped into the clear, the shotgun cradled in his arm. The muzzle pointed directly at Babson's belly.

Johnny was playing with death, not only for himself but for the ranch crew as well. If a man on either side got jittery and went for his gun, hell would be loose on a holiday.

"Don't make a move for your shootin' irons," he warned the crew in a tight voice, "less you want your boss filled full of buckshot!"

Babson looked once into the shotgun's muzzle. He shuttled his gaze to Stevens. "Call him off," he said sharply, "or you'll be in bad trouble!"

"Drop that gun," Stevens ordered curtly, his face dark and drawn. "We don't fight the law!"

But Johnny shook his head slightly and kept the gun trained on Babson. Then Johnny called to Curley, "Get off your horse, Curley. Come over here!"

Curley hesitated. He looked at Stevens, and he swung down.

Johnny heard him approaching. "Go behind me!" Johnny said. Curley circled around and came up on Johnny's right side, Johnny kept his gaze on Babson, watching the posse from the corner of his eyes.

"Lift up the sheriff's coat—" Johnny told Curly. "See what you find."

Curley knew his business; he came up to Babson from in back. He reached out his arm and pulled up the coat. For one instant, he stared at the gun as sunlight gleamed on the pearl handle. He ripped out a startled oath and yanked it from the holster. His voice was unbelieving. "By dam'—it's Lonny's!"

Babson sat his saddle like an iron man. The muscles pulled along his reddish jaw and, just once, his hands twitched. Johnny raised his gun muzzle slightly and the sheriff locked both hands around the horn.

Curley circled Johnny and brought up alongside Stevens' horse. "It's Lonny's, sure enough," he said to Stevens. He held up the gun. "You can see his name on the barrel."

Mal Stevens lifted his gaze from the gun to Babson and there was a stern, ominous quality in his voice. "How did you get that gun?"

Babson hesitated before he answered. "I don't aim to talk with that scattergun held on me," he said coolly. "You boys is head-in' for a pack of trouble." The posse men strung out beyond him sat erect in their saddles with a wary alertness. Johnny stole a glance at Jim and Idaho and saw that their glances never left the men in front of them. They were too old at the game to get sucked into the argument and have their attention distracted.

Curley took a step forward and there was a cold certainty in his voice. "You took that gun from Lonny after you shot him. Lonny didn't suspect nothing because he knew you. He let you get up close and somebody shot him from behind!"

Babson said nothing; he just watched with his smooth, red face devoid of expression.

"If you'd found Lonny dead and taken his gun," Curley continued, "you'da knowed damn well that we wasn't rustlin' cattle."

One of the posse men spoke up. "We found that gun back along the trail."

"Like hell you did!" Curley said hotly. "Whoever took that gun woulda kept it—just like Babson did."

Babson shrugged. "Look us over," he said with a cool tolerance. "We all carry rifles—there ain't a shotgun in the crew."

Stevens' voice cracked like a whiplash: "How did you know that Lonny was killed with a shotgun?"

THE suddenness of the question startled Johnny. He shot a glance at Stevens. In that instant, Babson jabbed spurs to his horse and dropped over the off side.

Johnny's gun roared, and it seemed as if he'd been holding a couple of sticks of dynamite. He missed Babson, but that double load of buckshot caught a couple of the possemen and knocked them from their saddles. And Johnny was knocked teakettle over tin cup on the ground; for in his haste, he'd pulled both triggers at the same time and the vicious recoil of the tennage had sent him sprawling, with the shotgun half a dozen yards away.

One of the possemen's horses, boogered by the deafening report, was coming right for him, buck-jumping, fore feet raised. There was a confused melee of shots and trampling hoofs.

Blindly, Johnny rolled aside, moving by instinct. His clutching hand came in contact with something hard lying on the ground; his fingers closed around it. It was a six-shooter dropped by one of the possemen whose body lay near him. Johnny raised himself with his left palm flat against the earth, his right clutching the gun.

He glimpsed Babson's legs under the belly of his horse, caught the glint of Lonny's pearl-handled gun as its muzzle came down. Johnny fired just before Babson pulled the trigger. Babson crumpled, still trying to get in a shot. Johnny's Colt spat flame again, and Babson keeled over on his back, his booted feet beating out death's tattoo on the hard ground.

Johnny looked around, picked up the shotgun and broke it, his stiff fingers ramming shells into the barrels. But it was all over.

The two men who had been hit with the buckshot were sprawled on the ground and a third lay near them. One man was pinned under a struggling horse and his screams would later haunt men of nights. The remaining posseman had wheeled his horse and was streaking along the line of brush.

Stevens sat grimly erect, a big Colt smoking in his hand. Idaho was blowing down the barrel of his gun and warily watching the men on the ground.

Jim was slumped a little in the saddle, a dazed look on his face and a spreading patch of red on his shirt.

Johnny ran over and tried to get the horse off of the man on the ground but a bullet had hit the animal in the back, either breaking it or paralyzing the hind legs.

Curley came up and put a bullet through the animal's head. Stevens came over then and they managed to drag the man from beneath the body. They laid him on the ground but he was too badly smashed to live. His chest was caved in and when he breathed, red foam tinged his lips.

Johnny stayed with him while Curley and Stevens looked over what was left of the posse. They came back later, bringing the body of Babson with them.

"The fall woulda killed him if the bullets didn't," Curley said. "His neck is broke. The two you got with buckshot'll never rustle no more cattle and somebody polished off the third—put a bullet right between his eyes."

The dying man rolled his head to look at Babson.

"I knowed we was fools to rustle two herds at once but you couldn't tell *him* nothin'."

Stevens face was darkly somber as he looked down at the dead lawman. "I'm beginning to see," he said, "how it was the rustlers were never caught."

Idaho was putting a bandage on Jim and Stevens and Curley went over to them.

Johnny heard Stevens say, "You're in no shape to ride, Jim. We'll leave you here and send back a wagon. It can pick them up," he gestured towards the bodies, "and take 'em on into town." Curley and Idaho mounted and Stevens walked over to his horse and stepped into the saddle.

Johnny watched them, feeling out of the picture somehow and with a feeling of disappointment gnawing at him. Of course, he had been slow on the trigger when Babson had bolted, but he *had* got two of the

rustlers. That ought to count for something. Johnny had sort of figured it might be worth a job. Why, they wouldn't even have tumbled to the fact that the posse was rustlers if it hadn't been for him.

Stevens picked up the reins of Jim's horse and rode over to Johnny. "If you'd like a job of horse wranglin'," he said, "climb on this pony and we'll head for the ranch."

He said it so casually that Johnny stared at him, not quite believing he had heard right. "You—you mean you'll give me a job?" His voice was tight and with sudden excitement.

Stevens nodded and held out the reins. "Climb aboard."

Johnny stepped into the saddle. Then his face clouded. "I'll have to stop for Major," he said.

"Sure," Stevens agreed. "Bring him along—there's plenty of pasture."

Johnny put into words what he had been thinking. "I'm sorry I missed Babson," he said, "but I reckon gettin' the other two made up for it."

Stevens nodded. "Yes," he said, "that was a good job—but you were hired before that."

Johnny stared. "I don't reckon I understand."

There was a little smile around the corners of Stevens' eyes and Curley was openly grinning. "I watched the way you babied that broken-down Major horse," Stevens said. "I reckoned you'd be a good hand with horses. I told Curley to leave you—and if you crossed the creek on foot to side us, the job was yours." He touched his horse and moved off.

Johnny followed, his shotgun stuck in the boot and a new-found content warming his wet body. Trailing Major back to the ranch would slow him down some but he judged that before sundown he'd be in that big kitchen again, talking to Allie and eating some of her good cooking.

THE END

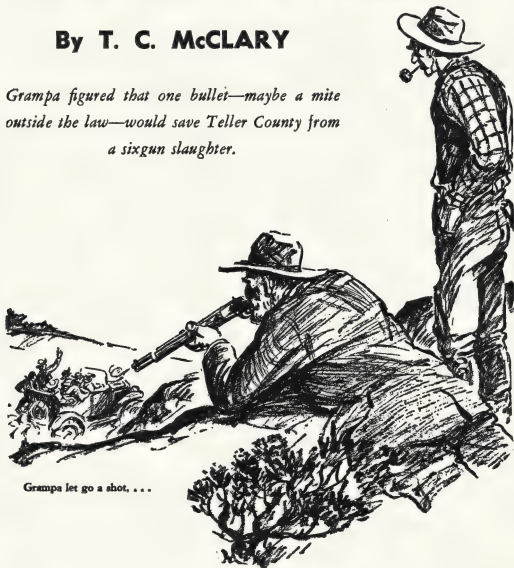
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A BULLET IN TIME . . .

By T. C. McCLARY

Grampa figured that one bullet—maybe a mite outside the law—would save Teller County from a sixgun slaughter.



Grampa let go a shot, . . .

GRAMPA Buell opened one cantankerous blue eye and cocked it at the sliver of rose-gold light that sliced over the gray rim of the horizon and down into his window. For a moment, he lay watching it as if it were a creeping enemy. Then he hit the cowhide rug in a violent flurry of arms, legs and billowing nightshirt, hollering, "Tilly!"

Only the sound of his own voice rolled back at him, none the more musical for

having echoed off an assortment of pots and pans. His hawk nose pinched in a long sniff at the morning air. There was the smell of coffee but it was dying. No fresh coffee odor was drifting through the house.

He jerked out of his nightshirt, still muttering. It was downright disgusting that a man his age would be sleeping clean to sunup! But it was worse that he'd let himself get softened by a woman to where he

depended upon her. Except for his granddaughter, he'd be pawing sand at first break of day and boiling his own coffee by dawn.

At last, he liked to think so.

Right now he was smarting with the thought of the laugh he'd get downtown if the boys knew he was just getting up. By gum, Abe Bender would have some reason to accuse him of getting old!

He yanked britches over his long red flannels and grabbed a towel. Because he was particularly irritated at the effete ways of civilization, he stomped out the living room instead of the kitchen door for the pump.

A familiar and annoying chuckle broke through the early light.

Grampa spun about, spraddle legged, and glared at Judge Josiah Crocker in his new-fangled flivver at the front gate.

The judge called out, "Mornin', Speed. Yore granddaughter didn't calculate you'd be up for a half hour yet. Well, that's the comfort of growing old."

"Old." Grampa Buell yelped in the voice of a crow. "Why, you old nanny goat, I can still lick you one hand tied behind me!"

He gave his granddaughter a glare of outrage. "You know good and proper I'm usually up and out by dawn!"

She failed to either smile or tremble. She glared right back. "You really aim to run for, sheriff like the judge claims?" she demanded.

"Yore darned tootin' I do!" He nodded adamantly. "What's wrong with that?"

Hot tears sprang against her pretty eyes. "It isn't bad enough you can't even give me a decent wedding present! Now you've got to go making laughing stock of us as well!" She gave him a molten look and pivoted and flung back to the house.

Grampa Buell scowled to hide his embarrassment. He'd had the money for a nice wedding present, but he had forgotten just what he was saving it for in a game of poker. He poked out his under lip and regarded the judge with sun-faded, but sharp blue eyes. He demanded:

"What brings you here this time of night? You ain't been up this early yoreself since you was a pup!"

"Well, mebbe I shook out five minutes earlier than usual," the judge allowed.

"What I come by for, Speed, the boys are aiming to bring yore papers for entry in the

sheriff election over this morning. I jist wanted yore say-so to tear 'em up."

"Tear 'em up?" Grampa yipped. "What fer? I aim to run!"

The smile washed off the judge's face. "Speed, yore getting plumb addled!"

"Addled, am I?" Grampa yelled. "I'll show ya all! I was sheriff of this county thirty years back, and I reckon I can be agin! It's high time somebody put an end to the wild doings around here. Three men robbed and killed when they was drunk, barns burned up for pure mayhem—now a woman murdered! It's time I was back in the saddle!"

"I think my grand nephew will take care of things once he is in," the judge stated.

"You stopped to think what folks will say about his own wife-to-be's grampa running agin him?"

"Once a politician always a pole-cat!" Grampa growled. "Why don't you come out plain?"

"All right," the judge nodded. "There a lot of old-timers hereabouts ain't ever voted since real law came to Teller county. They'll turn out and vote for you. You might get in, and if you do, there'll be hell to pay!"

Grampa's eyes narrowed and showed pinpoints of diamond light. He said, "Josiah, I rid with you as youngsters and been a friend of yore's a long time. But one more insinuation about my age, and I—"

"I'm one man ain't worried about yore age!" the judge broke in. "I'm worried about the hell you'd raise! When you were sheriff things were a heap sight different. but you were still sheriff, judge and jury and wrote yore own law. And yore idees ain't much quieted any with more sober years!"

"You got a sheriff with quiet idees," Grampa snapped. "So danged quiet he won't even ride up to that mining camp and smoke out the low down scum that murdered that woman! Why? Because it's a bunch and he's afraid!"

"But you'd ride up?" the judge inquired.

"Yore danged tootin! I'd ride up and burn out the whole damned camp! Any camp tolerates that kind of vermin needs a burning!"

"And start a five year war between the cattle and the mining crowds!" the judge said grimly. "Speed, I am going to have to

forget our friendship and fight you. We got no idee who the varmints who did that killing are. And when we find out, they have got to be treated under due process of law!"

"By cracky, ye've gone plumb soft in the head and yella in the liver!" Grampa announced. "I never woulda thought it, Josiah! But I ain't ever broke the law, that anyone could prove, and I will get those skunks within the new fangled law, and do it single handed!"

THE two glared at each other with the spiteful bitterness of old friends split asunder. The judge started his flivver up and with minor bucks and noises, it rolled off for town. Grampa turned and forgot about washing and pegged into the kitchen. His granddaughter almost slammed the coffee at him.

He demanded, "What's wrong with you folks? Ain't a woman or a barn safe hereabouts and you get all het up when a real man wakens up to do something about it!"

"That's not why you're running for sheriff!" she answered hotly. "It's on account of Abe Bender telling you you'd creak if you got back in a saddle again, and get plumb wore out with the weight of carrying a star!"

"Well, nobody's going to call me old awhile!" grampa grumbled. He felt a twinge in his weather shoulder and started to stretch and rub that arm. He caught himself and stopped abruptly.

His granddaughter was sniffing over the stove. "And just for that, you'll make me a laughing stock, and maybe spoil Chet Crocker's chances!"

"Doggone if I ain't ambushed on every side!" he grumbled and set stubbornly to eating breakfast.

Now that he had cooled off from the hazing, he didn't know what in thunder he wanted to be sheriff for in any case. Chet would probably get the election, and he was an able citizen and would make a first rate sheriff. But Grampa Buell had committed himself before all the boys down at the blacksmith's. He had let loose some pretty strong, and low, opinions of the present sheriff, and there wasn't much way he could get out of this.

Now that he stopped to think of it, his

way of catching the murderers would be just what Josiah had said. He would simply ride up to that mining camp and burn it down. He didn't like miners to begin with, and this was a particularly unsavory bunch anyway.

He grumbled around the house awhile, but his granddaughter's silence followed him around like a cold wind. He decided if he was running for sheriff, he ought to be toughening up a mite anyhow. He ought to ride out and cut a little sign along the Silver Camp trail and generally nose around.

He got his carbine and saddled up, and decided within two miles that he needed a new saddle. This old one had sure gotten stiff and full of bumps. He rode up country toward High Pasture and the hills. The gulches rang with the silvery rush of melted snows, and there was still snow in the shadows. The sides of the hills were bright green, broken with enormous spreads of bright spring flowers.

It was a kind of a day that was like a clear sweet song, but it was funeral dirge to Grampa. He began to suspect somebody had not only been tinkering with his saddle, but taught his horse a new rough gait as well! Beside that, his weather shoulder was throbbing like the devil.

He had meant to ride clean up to Camp, which was eighteen miles, and take a gander at the diggings. But he was mighty glad to find a road gang working off their taxes just at the end of the Merritt line. That was the last fenced property this side of the mountains. From there on, the country was wild, and grew stark and bare.

He reined up beside the gang which was working on a blocked culvert and nodded, most of them being old friends. Panhandle Brissard squinted at him and leaned atop his shovel. Panhandle was working foreman and with the indelicacy of old friendship he asked, "You come out looking for some honest work?"

"I come out here campaigning, you old coot!" Grampa growled. He got stiffly from his saddle. "I aim to run for sheriff."

"Well, I reckon we'll have to vote for you jist to keep you off the county poor rolls," Panhandle allowed. "What's your stand on these wild doings?"

"Smoke the bunch out and lyn—" Grampa started and broke off. "Smoke 'em out and bring 'em within the law!" he corrected

"We're gettin' downright mollicoddle," Panhandle snorted. "Old days we'da rid up to that mining camp and put a torch to it and figured any man started to run out of the fire was the guilty one and shot him proper."

GRAMPA scowled. "But now we got to keep the law. Well, I never saw a time the law was smarter'n a good Christian!" He took a chaw and extended the hospitality to Panhandle. He put his gaze across the rocky road to where a small herd of horses was grazing beyond Merritt's fence. Old Sunshine was up there, looking like a moth-eaten rug, with her eyes rheumy and half her teeth gone, but still surviving.

"By gum, she ain't ever going to die!" he allowed with a tough wistfulness, sight of the old mare taking his memories back across the many years. He sat down on a rock, and Panhandle leaned on the county time while they chewed the fat.

Grampa had been kneading his weather shoulder without much thought, but now a violent twinge caused him to buck. He glared at the grins this brought. "Why, ye ding-dong, mangy coyotes!" he told them. "That's blizzard sign!"

"Hah!" young Randolph chortled. "You mean buryin' time, grampa!"

"No he don't!" Panhandle stated through his humor. "Speed's shoulder is a real weather breeder! Speed, how much time's it twinge?"

"Two hours, mebbe," Grampa growled. "Mebbe less. That was a real humdinger twist!"

"You fall for that?" Randolph called at Panhandle.

"Enough," Panhandle told him, "so we're going to gather our tools and lit for Merritt's place!"

The chug of an auto and the raw voiced argument of drunks broke upon the mountain peace. A dilapidated car came boiling up the road, holding six of the most brutal and unwholesome specimens Grampa had ever seen. The drunks yelled some insolent remarks and waved a bottle.

Grampa's beetling eyebrows bushed. He

growled at Panhandle, "Now I would betcha we could massacre that carload and there'd be nothing put agin our names in the Good Book upstairs!"

The car came to a halt upon the brow of the hill, boiling over and sitting there to cool off. The drunks yelled and passed the bottle. Grampa's eyes were keen and sharp upon that bunch. He didn't like any part of them. He could remember a few of that kind in wilder, earlier days, and it was because of them that vigilantes had come into existence.

"Even their auto's crummy!" Panhandle snorted. "Look at that spare tire! If those skunks got a blowout and had to change, they couldn't even make camp over that wolf-tooth trail!"

Grampa growled, "I can recollect see'in' skunks like 'em shoot down Injun boys jist to test their powder."

The two fell into glum silences, disproving of everything about these men. The bottle was passed until empty, and one of the men heaved it toward the cavvy of horses with a raw laugh. It flew far wide of the mark, bringing a burst of derision from the others. But there was no real humor in that laughter. It held danger; the most brutal note of bullies who would try to outvie each other's cruelty.

It came then when the big fellow in back stood up with his carbine in hand. He yelled roughly, "Hell, I'm four quarts ahead of ya, Slug, and I can still pop that moth-eaten hoss blanket out there!"

He spat and lifted the gun and fired. He hit old Sunshine, but not a clean shot. The air was split with that terrible cry, a horse's scream. The man cursed, and fired a second shot, and the frenzied horse dropped and lay still.

The man at the wheel threw the car into motion, tumbling the big man onto the floor. The car lurched over the hill and out of sight.

EVERY man on that road gang was a horseman and now they stood frozen with gray patches in their faces and murder in their eyes. Panhandle muttered, "Man would shoot a hoss like that would do anything!" Young Randolph suddenly exploded, "Boys, that's murder! Who'll take a little ride to watch a roasting fire to-night?"

They turned their attention upon Grampa Buell. He was stiff with years but he had been a hellion in his youth and the toughest, quickest acting law that country ever had. He wasn't a man to beat around the bush.

Grampa's lips compressed. He said, "Boys, I approve of them sentiments, but times have changed. And I am running for a public office to uphold the law. Strictly."

Panhandle's eyes bugged. "Ya mean you'd have no part after seeing this?"

"I mean I'd feel obliged to bear witness, even," Grampa stated. "And now you boys better get moving to Merritt's while you got time."

They turned away from him muttering. Panhandle couldn't move. He stood disbelieving, and finally he rasped. "Speed, you don't mean that! You got something up yore sleeve!"

"I got me a little hunting to do," Grampa stated. "And then I am riding into Merritt's." He walked over to his horse and got his carbine. He came back jerking in a shell and sprawled out on a ridge. Beneath him, the hill ran down precipitously to a dark fast stream of water and then the road climbed a hill of a different order. That next hill marked the beginning of the real rock country. From there on was jagged and desolate and barren land.

"What in hell you up to?" Panhandle demanded.

"You see that rabbit sitting up on the crown of the hill?" Grampa asked. "I aim to pop him."

"You can't even see no more!" Panhandle snorted. "That's a rock!" Then he noted the miner's car chugging up toward that crest. A soft sound of understanding came from his throat. "It was the center hombre in the back," he said.

"Shet up while I bead on that rabbit's head," Grampa growled.

The car came onto the brow of the hill and crept across the rock. The driver was not stopping, but the car was going very slowly. Grampa said, "Hell, that rabbit will get scared plumb off!" and let go a shot.

There was a swirl of dust and the car disappeared. Grampa got up and looked at Panhandle. "Reckon you were right," he admitted. "Just a hunk of rock."

Panhandle looked at him with something akin to angry contempt.

"If that's the best you could shoot, why didn't you leave me the gun? All ya did was pink that back tire! They're so drunk they won't even know they were shot at. They'll think they got a blowout!"

"Well, it'll give 'em some trouble changing," Grampa growled.

"I'm ashamed of ya!" Panhandle said straight out. "You better forget that sheriff idee, Speed!"

They got their horses and rode for Merritt's.

They had been inside perhaps twenty minutes when the blizzard struck. Black and sudden and violent out of a clear sunny sky. It lasted perhaps an hour, the way mountain blizzards will. Then it was gone, and except for the lingering cold and snow, there was no sign of it in the sky.

Panhandle growled, "Well, yore still good for somethin', Speed. But you run for county weather feeler and forget sheriff!" They rode back through already softening drifts for town.

Grampa Buell was very stiff and sore for three solid days. Not even to save face before his granddaughter was he going to roll out early. He was forced to by the arrival of the incumbent sheriff who showed no friendly patience.

Grampa demanded, "What's the jedge want me fer?"

"The warrant says, 'Endangering public life'" the sheriff told him.

"By dam, I reckon I pinked one of them mining skunks—but I didn't even kill him!" Grampa muttered. "It'll ruin my election!"

It looked like the whole danged county had crowded into town. The crowd was grinning, and Grampa didn't like those grins. They were the kind a man got when folks meant to laugh him off the range. There was a sharp, bright look in Judge Josiah's eyes, and Panhandle was in the witness box.

"It's a plot!" Grampa growled to himself. He noted suddenly that the back of the court was piled with bales of coyote pelts. He was being called up on county bounty day! That was the final insult!

"You are charged," the judge said abruptly, "with a serious offense, Grampa Buell. You are charged with shooting

across a county road with traffic passing!" Grampa gaped. "Jist that? I didn't hit—unh—nothing?"

The judge looked at him with keen interest. "Were you aiming at a passing car by chance?"

"Oh, no! Nothin' like that!" Grampa wheezed. He was purple. A neat political trap! If he admitted he was, they would slap him with attempted manslaughter. In clearing that charge, he put himself before the public as that of low characters—a bum shot! His chances for election were ruined.

"Five dollars fine for endangering public life!" Judge Josiah purred. He let the tip of his tongue rest upon his thin lower lip with relish of Grampa's expression. Then he said, "By the way, you might as well take yore bounty check while yore here."

"Mine?" Grampa mumbled. He gave them a closer look. Pelts had to be turned in within three months for bounty, and some of those moth eaten hides had been hanging in barns for years! He saw instantly a new trap. They were trying to frame him into an attempt to defraud the county. "Them pelts ain't mine!" he yelled.

The judge looked over his glasses into the crowd. "You said they were all Grampa's, Abe Bender?"

"Done swore to it on oath," Abe nodded. "They wuz all piled in wagons on his place when I drove them frozen miners' bodies in this mornin'. I had some of the boys drive the wagons in to help an old man out."

"An old man!" Grampa yipped. "Why you—" He stopped abruptly. "What frozen miners?"

"Why six of 'em," Abe said. "Looked like they had two blowouts on the Silver Camp road and tried to hike it, and the blizzard caught 'em. Looks like they wuz the bad bunch. One of 'em had poor Maizie Little's locket on him. Big brute

he was, with one shot gone from his gun."

"Just save the gossip," the judge interrupted, "until court business is finished here. Clerk, how much is that county check for?"

"Four hundred pelts at two fifty bounty for each pelt," the clerk stated. "One thousand dollars, Grampa."

Grampa took the check automatically. Across his puzzlement he was conscious that they must have darned near curry-combed the county to find that many old pelts.

"Now," the judge asked suggestively, "the wild bunch all having been rounded up, as it were, by Providence, do you still feel the call to come out of retirement and run for sheriff, Grampa?"

Grampa looked at the check, and then around at the grinning faces. Particularly at Abe's. Abe's eyes were sunken and it was clear he had not had much sleep for a couple of days. Just about time, Grampa considered, to ride around and collect them hides. He was vindicated of old age. And he was a thousand dollars to the good.

Besides, his granddaughter was standing very straight and proud beside Chet Crock-er. That check would get her a mighty handsome wedding present.

"Why," he said to the judge, "the bad element having been disposed of, I don't rightly see why I should crowd for public office, Judge. And then, public office makes a man powerful tricky, sometimes." He grinned and turned away.

The bang of Judge Josiah's gavel snapped him around. The judge was scowling, and he snapped thinly now, "Just don't try to get away without paying that there five dollar fine, Speed Buell! We have got laws in this county, and if you citizens can't keep within 'em, you have got to pay!"

Grampa pulled the money out and growled: "Man can't even shoot at a rabbit any more without running afoul of the law!"

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CODE OF THE CAVALRY

Galt caught Foxley chopping down with his gun. . . .



By **STEVE HERRINGTON**

In a frontier town, hostile to the Army, Captain Galt Bell had to unmask the renegade who was hanging cavalymen's scalps on a redskin chieftain's tepee.

GALT BELL felt muscles cramping with the effort of holding himself in. Before the war he had been a fur runner, one of that reckless company whose pride was its freedom of action, its swift judgment, and its sudden hand in dealing with trouble. At Chickamauga and Appomattox he had been in unfamiliar country, fighting in an unfamiliar style. Being a part

of the army of the republic had been no restriction, then. But now he was back in his own bailiwick, back in the great open beyond the Missouri and pitched against the kind of enemies he understood—redskins and blacklegs. It was sometimes hard for him to remember that a captain's tunic forced a man to approaches and actions different from those open to a man in a buckskin shirt.

Not that he regretted sticking with the service for this one additional tour of duty after Lee's surrender. He had been told he was needed and that was enough. There was a job still to be done, out here in the high desert. Arizona grass was drinking a lot of good blood and the flow had to be stopped. Apaches and the more ruthless white leeches which sucked at the vitality of any frontier were sating themselves unchecked.

The hard thing was having to keep on remembering that every hand he played was not his, alone—that it belonged also to a uniformed legion, every man of which would gain or suffer with him in every move he made. It was the curse of soldiering that civilians, babbling with gratitude, were still eager to believe the worst about the very uniforms which were their bulwark against violence and sudden death.

Galt stared woodenly at the thin, handsome face of the slender little man across the table from him. Here was a dangerous enemy. Yet it was hard to believe.

There was, somewhere in the world, a snake called the *krait*. A mildly colored little snake, small and swift and unobtrusive. Galt remembered its picture in some book. A reptile so easily overlooked that men often trod on it without knowing. Yet it was more deadly than the great king cobra.

Sid Foxley was like that little snake. The simile stuck warningly in Galt's mind. He watched the man until Foxley finished his drink and pushed the glass aside.

"I'm flattered, Captain," Foxley said mockingly. "The El Dorado sees a lot of troopers. There's even a cavalry major who's a regular. But an intelligence officer—we're getting up in the world!"

The man was laughing. Galt understood why. At the camp, Captain Bell was merely a routine replacement officer, come out to take the place of another captain who had

grown weary of chasing a foeman who could never be found. The commandant knew Galt Bell was attached to intelligence service; the commandant—and Sid Foxley!

Galt pushed his own glass to the center of the table with an unmistakable gesture. An officer could at least choose those with whom he drank. If Foxley understood, he ignored the thrust. Galt spoke coldly.

"You're not getting up, just onto thin ice, Foxley!" he corrected. "There are a few things won't even go down an army throat. How Saguario and his Apaches always know which way we're going before we start, for instance. How he finds out how strong a party is and the like. And something else. This is pretty dull country for a trooper. He's got to have his fun and his slice of hell. But why is it that when there's a fight at the El Dorado, it's always an important man who's laid up? There's a leak somewhere. I've got a hunch where it is. If it doesn't dry up, I'll have to plug it!"

Foxley's lips drew back from his teeth. "You'll probably try, Captain," he agreed amiably. "But you might have trouble if you prowl me too close. You say there's a leak. Can you prove it? And if you could prove Saguario was getting information out of Long Fork, could you prove it wasn't your own troopers letting the word out?"

The man stopped and shook his head. He went on gently, speaking like a wise man cautioning a young and headstrong friend.

"This country's just finished three years of mighty long war. Saguario and his Apaches don't add up to much, even in Long Fork, against those three long years. Folks have their bellies full of looking at blue uniforms and getting pushed around by some buckos that think they're tin gods in cavalry boots. I've got friends in this town. I could start some pretty nasty talk. I built something when I built the El Dorado. I might fight for it!"

Galt had been riffling a deck of cards left on the table. With swift fingers, and without answering for a moment, he built a clever two-foot tower with the pasteboards. He looked at Foxley, smiled, and stood up.

"I built something right there, friend," he said quietly. "But look—"

He touched the top card of the flimsy pile with the point of a finger and the whole thing collapsed. Galt's smile widened into

almost pleasantness. "Maybe there's more than pasteboard in this place of yours," he said. "But I doubt it. Don't make me push on it to find out. Plug that leak!"

Galt turned, then, and pushed out the door.

AT THE camp Colonel Elliott, commandant, had an orderly waiting at Galt's tent. Galt followed the messenger across to command headquarters. The colonel dismissed the orderly and rubbed his hands together briskly.

"You've found your man?"

Galt nodded.

"Good, Captain! I didn't expect you back before midnight—a strange town and all. My copy of your orders recommended you highly. I'll add my good word for this job, Captain! I've ordered a police detail told off for you. Picked the toughest men we've got. They'll do your job quick and sudden! Hustle them back into town and make your arrest. As soon as you've got your man, I'll order the troop out!"

Galt scowled. He mistrusted the colonel's enthusiasm. "The troop—"

Colonel Elliott chafed his hands again, eagerness lighting his tired eyes. "This is it!" he exulted. "After six of the damndest months a command ever had! A scout has contacted Saguaro's whole band, holed up in a pocket back in the hills. A natural for attack! As soon as I heard the report, I slapped the scout in solitary. No talking for him till tomorrow. And I haven't made any assignment to the lieutenants, yet. I won't till you've picked up your man and there's no way for word to get out. This time we'll get Saguaro!"

"You'll get Saguaro, sir," Galt agreed quietly. "But that town over there won't like an arrest squad. If I pick up the man that's keeping Saguaro posted on your movements, you'll be able to surprise the Apache. But Long Fork won't give a damn about that. It won't see you got Saguaro because we plugged a leak. It'll only see that the soldiers who took six months to run down a little bunch of Indians had the top-handed gall to arrest a citizen on his own street. And talk like that town will make travels a long way across the grass. We'll need friends if we're going to police the frontier. That kind of talk won't win us any.

"A town like this believes that a soldier thinks he's a god because he wears a uniform. We've got to show them that we're just a bunch of men from a lot of towns like their own, out trying to do a job."

Colonel Elliott swore savagely. "Trying to do a job, for them—and they tie our hands!"

"We'll have to untie them then," Galt said.

"How?"

"By proving beyond anybody's doubt that a certain townsman has been warning Saguaro of every move at the camp. By proving this townsman has been doing this to keep us here, to keep the streets—and his bar—full of troopers. By proving this townsman is a more dangerous brand of enemy than any Indian. When we've proved these things, we can take our prisoner. And we'll have also proved then that a soldier's just an ordinary gent with a chore to do!"

Colonel Elliott wagged his head stubbornly. "That last can't be done. I've been trying to prove that one thing to civilians for thirty years!"

"With a regiment at your back!" Galt added. "This is one man's job. You get the troop out. Turn your scout loose. Go ahead like you have on every other sortie. I'll handle Long Fork—and the man who talks too much!"

Colonel Elliott stood up. "I'm against this, Captain. War isn't a place for school-boy experimenting. If army jobs were one-man affairs, we wouldn't have five thousand men under arms in the national militia, right now. But I haven't any choice. My orders are to give you a free hand. If this fails and we draw a blank again or another damned ambush tonight, I'll hold you personally responsible for every man we lose. And I'll sour my report on you so steeply that headquarters will break you clear back to the ranks. What's more, I'll take care of this town and its swivel-jaws in my own way—so it won't forget!"

Back in his own quarters, Galt spent an uneasy half hour. Colonel Elliott was a first-line officer—one of the best. He had the peculiar temperament necessary to Indian fighting, a superb patience with an enemy hard to come up to and even harder to close with in tactical combat. But the colonel belonged to the old army, steeped in the tradition and accomplishments of the

corps until a man without a blue uniform and a twenty-year ribbon was no man at all.

The colonel was the right officer to snare Saguario or to beat him into submission in an open fight. But he wasn't the man to treat with the proud and resentful frontiersmen who peopled the high country.

Galt was acutely aware that he had flatly told the colonel he had found Saguario's spy in Long Fork. At best he had no more than a hunch. The flat statement had been made to keep the colonel away from the town.

Alone, now, Galt wasn't entirely sure that this was best. The army had strong medicine for many things. Medicine which had proved its worth all the way from Harper's Ferry to Lee's surrender. Maybe an army didn't need friends and the faith of friends. Maybe it only needed a swift, hard hand and respect where there wasn't fear.

It was a sure thing that if the El Dorado was the source of Saguario's constant information concerning the troops, Colonel Elliott could plug the leak with a single squad of picked men. Plug it permanently, too. And maybe a town's resentment and lack of understanding of high-handed measures wouldn't add up to much in the long run against the certain end of Saguario's band and the close of this too-long campaign.

But the knowledge remained that headquarters had sent him out on this last assignment, not as an Indian fighter, but as a plainsman who understood the people of the high country and could make them understand him. His way, gamble though it was, had to be best. The army needed friends.

GALT stayed in camp only long enough to make sure the colonel took no further unusual steps to keep the coming sortie secret. It was essential to his own plan that usual routine be strictly followed in the camp. The breed of men which peopled Long Fork was direct in its thinking and liked its evidence unadorned with secrecy and by-play. As was usual, when the companies were mustered, junior officers discovered that many of their commands had wandered down to the lights of the town. Galt waited until the colonel told off a detail to go in after stragglers. Then he swung up on his waiting horse and rode in a hasty

circle which brought him out on the far edge of Long Fork.

He was already unobtrusively moving along the street from the opposite direction when the straggler detail moved in. He trailed them at a little distance, watching them rout troopers from a couple of stores and the Horseshoe Cafe. When they reached the El Dorado he eased into shadow, his interest sharp. Eight or ten men had been in Foxley's place. They filed raggedly out, fell in with the others, and started moving on the double toward the camp. Galt slid forward. A moment after the last trooper came out of the El Dorado, he stepped into the place.

The El Dorado had considerable business on the floor. A number of games were going. There was a line at the bar. But there were big gaps in the room, places obviously vacated by the withdrawn troopers. How large these vacancies measured against the whole of the big room was a good indication of what proportion of Foxley's brisk business came from men in uniform.

Galt felt his hunch strengthen. Colonel Elliott's command was making Foxley rich. It was this fact and not the cleverness of Saguario which had drawn this campaign out so long. A little treachery would be a small price for a man of Foxley's calibre to pay for continuation of a profitable trade. Galt moved with new confidence toward the master of the El Dorado.

Foxley stood at the front angle of the bar, his back toward the door. Four or five townsmen were within easy earshot of his position. Two of his own men were at his elbow. He was talking to this pair and didn't see Galt come in.

"The colonel shut the lid down on his boys early tonight," Foxley was saying. "Protecting them from us civilian wolves, I reckon!"

A townsman growled agreement.

"That's the army, blast 'em! Servants of the people—hell! Take a man's taxes in pay, kick a man around, and don't give no come-back. Eat and sleep and hound the paymaster, but it takes 'em six months to even get a smell of a damned 'Pache rene-gade!"

Foxley laughed easily and held up a leather folder. "Here's one trooper that parted with more than he figured on. Forgot his wallet in his hurry to get back to his

tent afore the colonel fanned his britches!"

Foxley tossed the wallet to one of the two men beside him. "Here, Shane, buy up a round of drinks for the house out of it. Then you and Hansen chouse out to the camp and turn what's left back to the gent that lost it!"

The man called Shane, a big bear of a man, caught the wallet and bellowed at the crowd. The townsmen pressed forward, laughing that a soldier should buy them drinks unknowingly. Galt looked at Foxley's fingers. They were slender, facile hooks. He knew how the trooper had lost his pocket-book. And he thought he knew why Foxley had lifted it. He shoved forward, his voice cutting sharply through the mutter of pleased talk.

"You think a trooper that's lost his cash will be so hard to find out at the camp, Foxley?" he asked. "Think it'll take two men to run him down? You don't know soldiers! Army paydays are a long ways apart out here. And that cash is hard come by. I'll take that wallet back with me. I won't have to look for its owner. He'll come on the double!"

Foxley wheeled. His eyes narrowed when he saw Galt. Many of the townsmen at the bar, sensing the stiffness in Galt's voice, turned curiously.

"Captain Bell, eh?" Foxley said thinly. "My friend, I don't want to know soldiers! That wallet was lost on my premises. I'm responsible until it's returned. I'll take care of it. Shane, get moving!"

Galt grinned bleakly. "There's a stir on out at camp. Must be, or stragglers wouldn't have been called back. Sending a couple of men out there on a thin excuse might be a way of finding what's stirring eh, Foxley?"

The saloonman's eyes flattened out. "So something might be stirring among the bluecoats, Captain?" he purred. "Could be. I hadn't thought on it. But it can't be much, eh? Not with an officer still hanging around a bar. Or maybe that's where you go when there's a stir! What the devil do I care what the army's doing—what does anybody here care? Likely chousing off after Saguarro again. But they'll limp back again in the morning with some thin story. And they'll be lining my bar again tomorrow night!"

"You hope—" Galt said.

Foxley shoved his back against the bar. "You looking for trouble, soldier?" he snapped.

Galt shook his head. "No. I'm looking for the gent who's been tipping Saguarro off to every move the detachment's made for the last six months. Objections, Foxley?"

"None!" the man said evenly. "But don't do your looking all in one place. We've had enough bluecoats for one night!"

Galt signaled the barkeep. "This round's mine," he said quietly. And he turned back to Foxley. "If Long Fork had had enough bluecoats at any time, Saguarro would have been finished a long time ago! This is a big country and it's a little army. The boys can't buck Apaches and home folks at the same time. I like this place, Foxley. And the back-stabbing son I want is in this room!"

FOXLEY started to say something else, but the barkeep started pouring whiskey into a long row of pony glasses. The townsmen shoved forward, lifted their drinks, and eyed Galt with measurement. Not one of them failed to recognize something important in the play between this army captain and the owner of the El Dorado. More than one was beginning to appreciate the fact that the army captain was no high-handed bluecoat but a soft-talking hombre on a chore. And they wanted to see how he did. Galt saw these things come onto their faces. Foxley must have also seen it.

Some of the steadiness left his eyes so that they shuttled uneasily. He left his pony of whiskey untouched until several pairs of eyes probed at him reminding that Galt's offer of a round was a gentleman's gesture, to be ignored only by enemies. He lifted the glass, then, tossed it off, and watched the door with increasing attention.

A townsman beside Galt smacked his lips appreciatively over his whiskey glass and nodded at a scar on Galt's left hand.

"Looks like a four-o trap might have bit when you wasn't figuring on it?" he suggested.

Galt nodded. "Up in the Hoback, four seasons ago," he agreed.

"The Hoback?" another grizzled veteran said. "Took the best catches of my life out'n there! Says it's deserted now. Ever run across some of the old crowd?"

Galt nodded again. "There's two boys out there in the camp who ran lines in the Hoback before the war. And another one who was factor at Pawnee Crossing for five years."

"The army, eh?" the old man said thoughtfully. "The army's got a lot of good men. Reckon I'll look up them Hoback boys. Might get a line on some of my friends."

Another townsman shoved in his oar. "Heard the other day that two squads of bluecoats got thirty wagons through Yellow Hand's whole party on the Smoky Hill. Yellow hand is no slouch when it comes to snaggin' wagons. Sounded like talk. Anything to it?"

"There were twenty-two of them," Galt said. "Only eleven of them reached Walzenberg. But the wagoners never got a scratch or lost a head of stock."

"Uh!" the man said thoughtfully, and lapsed into silence.

Somebody else recollected a story about troopers in the open country and launched into its account. Galt pried himself out of the little circle which had formed around him, his eyes on Foxley. The man worked up near the door. Galt edged after him. A few moments later the door battled open to admit Shane and Hansen, the two men who had gone out to the camp, ostensibly to return a trooper's lost wallet.

Shane grabbed his boss by the arm, his face jubilant.

"They're off for a fall again," he chuckled. "The whole works ridin' out. Must have found the red devil's in Bear Canyon—"

He choked off under a savage stab of Foxley's elbow.

"Shut up, you fool!" Foxley hissed. "Get moving—!"

The exchange at the door had been low-voiced. The men at the bar had missed it. But Galt was moving forward with long strides. Hansen, squared a little away from Shane and his boss, saw him first. Hansen choked out a little bleat of puzzled surprise at the expression on Galt's face. The other two wheeled.

The two of them saw Galt at the same instant. Shane caught a swift glance from Foxley and shoved for the door. Galt's reaching hand snagged the man's arm, whirling him back.

"We'd like to hear how things are at the camp, too, bucko!" he said tightly.

The big man pulled his arm away. Galt took another step and Shane rammed a balled fist at his face. Galt rocked his head, clearing the blow nearly, and sledged a short, whistling drive against the side of Shane's head. The man's knees slackened. Galt caught him under one arm and turned to catch Foxley sweeping a pistol-barrel upward for a downward chop. Hindered as he was by Shane's sagging bulk, Galt managed to free his own iron and ram it forward. Its level muzzle, inches from Foxley's ornately-buckled belt, sucked the wind from the saloonman's lungs.

"Between friends—" Galt said with savage smoothness—"but the rest of us want to hear what this bucko came in to tell you. Saguaro's in Bear Canyon. I heard that. And the troops are pulling out to find him. That wasn't guess work. I want to know



how Shane knew where the colonel's men were going!"

Foxley started a white-hot, sputtering protest. But the old man who had trapped his best catches in the Hoback Basin surged forward.

"You heard Shane tell Foxley that?" he snapped. "By hell, I'd like to know how Shane found it out. Maybe they's a reason why the bluecoats can't come up to them 'Paches, after all!"

Another townsman pushed between Foxley and Hansen, effectively breaking up the saloonman and his two aides. Shane's muscles tightened and he caught his balance groggily. Foxley's eyes snapped around the circle building about him. He turned to Shane, but he spoke to the crowd.

"I say this long-eared bluecoat didn't hear nothing!" he snapped. "What's the odds if them damned troopers is so loose-jawed that they rattle out where they're going—where any man can hear 'em!"

Galt sheathed his gun again. "Start talking, Shane!" he commanded.

Shane stuttered. "Like the boss says—" he finally muttered—"the camp was in an uproar. Sentries had been called in and talk was flyin' fast. A man'd have to be deaf not to hear what was up! It's a wonder it wasn't heard over here!"

Galt shook his head. "That's a lie, bucko!" he corrected flintily. "That's my army out there. That camp's never in an uproar. There's damned little talk and then only in the right ears. And there's always sentries out!"

Shane stared back without answer. Galt's shoulder heaved. A hard, tight fist drove deep into the puffiness below the big man's ribs. Shane grunted, doubled, and retched with agony.

"I said that was a lie, Shane!" Galt said evenly. "How'd you get past the sentries?"

"Crawled—" the man moaned.

Galt's mirthless grin tightened. "Crawled past the sentries so's you could deliver a wallet, eh?" he snapped. He suddenly shoved against the still gasping man and his hand rammed deep into Shane's jacket pocket. It came out with the wallet Foxley had waved in front of everybody previously. "And then you didn't deliver it! Why?"

FOXLEY snarled and made a forward movement but the old man who had trapped the Hoback stepped warningly in front of him. Shane shook his head stubbornly, keeping his big body bent low as a protection against further belly blows. Galt caught the collar of his jacket, jerked him off balance, and booted the seat of his trousers savagely. Shane sprawled flat. Galt picked him up, winding one hand tight in his shirt front.

"Why?" he prodded.

"Because we heard the colonel giving orders about going after Saguaro and right then seemed a bad time to get found in camp!"

Galt's grip on Shane's shirt-front tightened. "A bad time to be found back of the colonel's tent, listening to him give orders to his lieutenants!" Galt ground out. "That was your orders, wasn't it? To find out what the stir was and where the troopers were going and then get back here fast so

word would be sent on to Saguaro ahead of the troops!"

Shane glanced at Foxley. "No orders—" he whined. "I never said nothing about that damned Apache! Hansen and me just got amongst them tents and was afeared to make ourselves known for fear one of them crazy bluecoats runnin' around would put light through us!"

Galt spat out a disgusted oath and shoved Shane so that the man sprawled again. "A liar's no good without guts, Foxley!" he grated. "You should have remembered that when you hired this coyote!"

The saloonman looked eased when Shane quit talking. "This is going to cost you, soldier!" he promised. "Brass buttons don't give a man a right to shove another around in this town. You boys can't catch that 'Pache. Quit trying to pin it on somebody else. You've had your fun. Now, clear out!"

"I'm not going, yet—" Galt said thinly. "The detachment's gone on to Bear Canyon. Saguaro's there. I've got to wait till they get back to find out if they got him. And this place suits me for waiting."

He turned to the townsmen. "Skunk smell's pretty strong in here, boys. We'll have another drink on me!"

The crowd eased around Foxley and his two men. But interested eyes watched the man. The barkeep uneasily filled the ponies. They were downed. There was talk among the townsmen. Speculation, Galt knew. They were curious, sensing this wasn't played out.

Galt was certain in his own mind now that he'd tapped Foxley's game squarely. But he realized Shane had parted with all the information which could be driven out of him by anything short of mayhem. And too much violence would defeat its own purpose. High-country men could stomach prodding. How else could a gent make a stubborn one talk? But there was a limit and Galt realized his treatment of Shane, without more evidence to support it, had come close to that limit. He watched a clock on the back-bar.

At the end of a half hour he had bought another round, the old trapper from the Hoback had bought once, and the unwilling barkeep had set one up for the house. Bear Canyon wasn't too far from Long Fork. The colonel would ride the troop hard.

Galt measured time and distance. "A good saddle-man," he observed to the room at large, "might be able to beat the colonel to Bear Canyon if he left right now. In five minutes he'd be too late!"

The old trapper from the Hoback and one or two others looked directly from Galt to Foxley at this. The rest of the crowd stared at Galt without understanding.

Sid Foxley made no move for a long moment. Suddenly he wheeled toward Galt. "I don't know what your rotten game is, Bluecoat. But I've got my belly full! This is my place. I'm giving you thirty seconds to get out of it—standing up!"

Galt laughed and the sound had an eagerness in it. Foxley couldn't stand the gaff. Shrewd as the man was, this time he wasn't measuring odds. Galt had been afraid the man would keep silent, sacrificing Saguaro—who was, after all, only an anchor to hold the soldier trade within reach of the El Dorado—to deny any connection with the many times the Indian renegade had been warned of impending attack.

Galt watched Foxley with a grim fixity. Colonel Elliott had lost a lot of men, going against a forewarned enemy. Foxley's trade and Foxley's wealth had been built on the blood of fighting men. There was a score to even—a score which belonged to the service. Settling it was a fitting wind-up to a last tour of duty.

Foxley counted swiftly. Ten seconds

before the time he had promised was up, he reached for his gun. It was a smooth whiplash of motion which freed a belt-iron cut for a swift draw. The Army Colt was a heavier weapon, more cumbersome. Galt saw that the first shot would not be his.

But Foxley's gun never fired.

The heavy thunder of a cap-and-ball rocked the El Dorado. Foxley's face vanished in a mist of blood and black powder smoke. The old man who had trapped the Hoback Basin spun the cylinder of his huge old piece and disinterestedly blew smoke from its long barrel. Then he turned to the dazed townsmen.

"Boys, I reckon a skunk don't taint his own bottled whiskey. Looks as though the El Dorado is wide open. But don't go over your limit for a spell. They's going to be some soldiers in from the hills directly, mighty thirsty, hankering for company they've never got in this town, and with somethin's worth celebratin'—Saguaro!"

He stopped and took hold of Galt's arm. "Now, Cap'n," he said earnestly, "I'd like the names of them lads that was in the Hoback. I ain't talked old times with white men in a coon's age—"

Galt looked past the old trapper before he nodded. The faces of the people of Long Fork had a different look. And they were hanging back from the prize bottles on Foxley's back-bar—hanging back and waiting for bluecoats to join them. . . .

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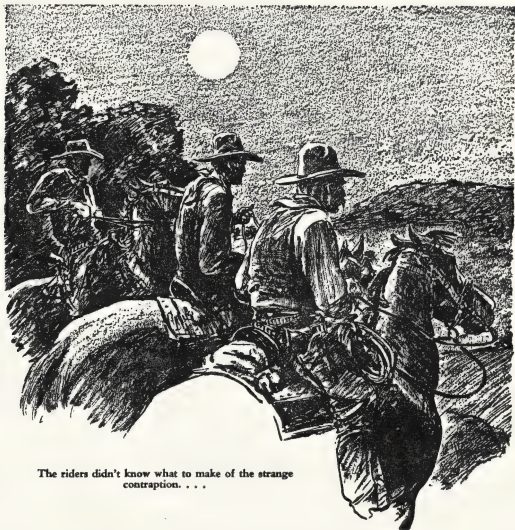
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CHAPTER ONE

Homecomer's Return

STANDING on his bunk, Pierce could see the yellow moon through the bars of his Deer Lodge prison cell, and he remembered the old days when life had been a thing of contentment. Only he hadn't figured it that way, then. And those memories brought a growling curse to his lips. He sagged down from the window.

His cell-mate murmured, "Forget the

past, kid. You can't go back to it. Things will never be the same for you again. Yore dad's dead, and mebbe yore ranch is still all in one piece—and mebbe it ain't. You wanted dinero the easy way, and yuh got it—until the sheriff caught up with your bunch. You were guilty, and you're payin' the price. Take my advice when yuh git out, and head away from that moon climbing over the mountains. Things won't ever be the same for you back home again."

It was sound advice, Pierce Comstock realized, but he couldn't take it. He was



GUN WAIF of the GOLD STORM

Trying to live down his jail-bird brand, Pierce Comstock played into the hands of a ruthless gunhawk out of the black past.

paying the price and the folks in Pioneer wouldn't hold it against him when he returned to his Eagle ranch and started to build a new life.

One year of his three-year term remained to be served. Each day he had made a little mark on the wall above his bunk—and each day freedom was coming closer.

Tom Martin and his daughter, Amelia, were looking after his Eagle spread for him. They'd be willing to forget these three years torn from his life.

"I'm goin' back," Pierce told his cell-

mate. "Everything will be all right. . . ."

He was in the yard the next day, exercising with the rest of the prisoners when a trusty signaled him from the ranks. "The warden," he said, "wants to see you in his office, Comstock. Come on along."

Pierce followed the trusty. He could feel an excitement heating his blood. It seemed to him suddenly that the chance was coming to ride back to Pioneer!

And that was the word awaiting him in the warden's office.

Solid and stocky behind his wide desk,

Captain Plummer greeted him with a broad smile. "Comstock," he said without preamble, "the parole board is releasing you into the custody of Sheriff Clyde McCants, in Pioneer. Your record here has been excellent. You have been a model, intelligent prisoner. You were twenty-two when you entered here—twenty-four now. You made a mistake—and you have paid the penalty. I do not think Pioneer people will hold it against you. However, you will find a lot different community than the one you left. Gold has been discovered along Willow Creek. I understand that miners from other communities have been flocking to Pioneer. It's a boomtown now with many strangers." He extended his hand. "Good luck to you, Comstock."

Pierce took the warden's hand. It was all like a dream. It still seemed like a dream when he pointed the crowbait nag he'd been able to buy with the money the warden had given him, toward the open, free country.

Why, if he rode all night, he'd make Pioneer by about ten o'clock the next morning. He'd report to the sheriff and ride on out to the Eagle, and then across its acres to Tom Martin's Longbow where Amelia would likely have dinner about ready to set on the table.

It was a thought to make him press the crowbait ahead at a faster pace. Free air was in his lungs. He savored it and let his memories of Deer Lodge slip into the past like a bad dream one forgets on awaking.

Only one cloud marred the happy vistas that lay ahead. Two of the wild young bunch he'd ridden with had escaped the ruthless gun-trap Sheriff Clyde McCants had set for them on that red night when a bullet had creased Pierce Comstock—and probably saved his life. For of the rest who'd fought the law guns five had died. He had lived, along with the two leaders who had escaped. Those two were Bett Killen and Jack Madsen—and they were a pair he never wanted to see again. . . .

Pierce Comstock looked Pioneer over eagerly as he jogged the crowbait down the dusty length of Pine Street. He saw that the warden had certainly been right. The town was just about twice as big as he remembered it. Shack buildings, and tent saloons had sprung up in vacant lots along the thoroughfare. Men he'd never seen before, dozens of them, were tramping the

boardwalks. Miners in bright shirts and heavy boots. Pioneer was booming. It wasn't much like the quiet cattle-town he had left two years ago.

Sheriff Clyde McCants probably had his hands full trying to keep things in order now.

AN off-key piano in one of the most pretentious tent-roofed saloons blasted raucous rhythm into the early morning, and the sound was like a signal that spread the doors suddenly.

Pierce saw a blond young fellow come pinwheeling through them, and he caught the distinct impression that there was no gunbelt strapped about the man's waist. A heavy-set man came storming through the doors, and there was a Colt in his hand.

Without conscious thought, Pierce found himself out of the saddle and running across the dusty street. "Hold it, you," he shouted. "That man ain't armed!"

The heavy-set gunhawk had reached the sidewalk. He growled: "Keep outa this."

Pierce had leaped across the young fellow's prone figure and stood facing the stocky gunhawk. "You better put that hog-leg away."

"I'll use it on you first, and Tim Parker second," the gunnie said flatly.

"Not today you won't," Pierce's right swept out like a rock at the end of a sling. He felt it smash solidly against the gunnie's jaw, and then the man was sitting down abruptly on the steps of the saloon. His Colt slipped from lax fingers, and Pierce kicked it to one side.

A crowd had quickly gathered. Pierce was dimly conscious of that, and then his eyes fastened on the lithe, meticulously garbed man who had come through the doors of The Discovery.

It was Bett Killen! Recognition was mutual. Pierce saw Killen's black eyes flick over him, and there was no warmth in the gaze. Killen was wearing the black garb of a gambler, and there was a long, brown cheroot smoldering between his lips.

"You're starting civilian life right, Comstock," Killen said coolly. "Fights like this are about what folks expect from jailbirds."

Words were on Pierce's lips, tumbling against his teeth. He wanted to tell the

crowd gathered behind him that Bett Killen had been one of the leaders of that wild bunch. But Killen's taunting gaze sobered him. Pierce said quietly: "You bet I'm starting life right, Killen. I ain't standing by and watchin' a kid without a gun get murdered."

The stocky gunhawk was sitting up now, rubbing his jaw, and his slate eyes were baleful as he looked over the lank young home-comer. "My name's Kaoky," he said flatly. "K.O. for short. And I'm going to K.O. you—when the time is right, less you make yourself scarce in a hurry."

"Better make that double, Kaoky," an unexpected voice drawled from Comstock's shoulder. "You'll have to finish us both."

Pierce glanced around. It was the blond young fellow Kaoky had called Tim Parker. Behind the man the crowd had thickened, and Pierce cursed under his breath. He couldn't have asked for a worse home-coming reception. But he figured it would be best to let this whole crowd know the stand he was going to take.

"I'm here to stay, Killen," he announced, "so anytime you and this gunhawk want to come looking for me, you'll find me at the Eagle."

Killen opened his lips, then held whatever he'd been about to say, for a stir in the crowd signaled the approach of more visitors.

Pierce glanced again across his shoulder. Long, lanky, Clyde McCants was coming through the crowd, star clinging brightly to the drab hue of his open vest.

When he'd headed for Deer Lodge with cuffs on his wrists, McCants had been a smooth-faced, middle-aged man straight as an arrow nocked to a bowstring. His mustache, drooping down on either side of his wide, firm lips had been brown, sleek. Now it was almost white, a little grizzled. Haggard lines had etched themselves from his nostrils to the corners of his lips. His broad shoulders were a little slumped, but the brace of Colt in crisscrossed belts about his thighs looked just as authoritative as ever, and his blue eyes were sharp and steady beneath sun-faded brows.

But he had certainly changed. That was the first quick thought crossing Pierce's mind, and he wondered what could have made the lawman age so rapidly in the space of two years. He had never blamed

Clyde for the savage gun-trap he had laid to send five rustlers to hell. In the lawman's shoes he would have done the same thing. It had been his duty to a star he'd sworn to honor.

McCants came pressing forward into the circular open space that had formed about the steps of The Discovery. His quick eyes had already taken in the whole scene, and Pierce saw something almost like weariness deepen the lines in his face as he looked up at Killen.

"Bett," he asked quietly, "what's the trouble?"

Killen seemed to be enjoying himself. Pierce watched a smile twist the gambler's thin lips as he drew his cheroot from between them. "Why nothin' much, Clyde," he said easily. "Tim Parker took on too much forty-rod and braced the wrong man." His eyes flicked Kaoky. "K.O. threw him out."

Pierce glanced from the sheriff to the young man beside him. Parker's gray eyes were clear, and they seemed to be trying to warn the home-comer, but Pierce brushed their message aside. He looked directly at the sheriff.

"Clyde," he said deliberately, "Bett ain't quite finished his story. Kaoky had a Colt in his fist when he hit the boardwalk, and Parker didn't. I finished the show. If cracking a killer on the jaw is wrong these days, why I guess I've done broken my parole wide open!"

CHAPTER TWO

Pioneer Trouble

McCANTS' face still looked weary as he turned his eyes on the homecomer. "We'll git to you, later, Comstock," he said without expression, and his glance flashed back to the gambler. "Killen," he said coldly, "I want no more trouble in your Discovery. If there is I'll hold you responsible!"

Bett Killen's face took on an expression of mock humility. "I'll shore try and keep the wild ones toned down, Mister Sheriff," he drawled. "Yes, sir, I shore will," and his words, Pierce thought, were like a slap to the lawman's face.

He saw Clyde McCants flush, and couldn't understand the lawman's hesitancy in calling the gambler here and now.

"Comstock," the sheriff said, and his voice sounded empty, "you and Parker come along with me."

The crowd parted and some of them, Pierce saw, were smiling derisively, others were shaking their heads indecisively, and gloom had settled over the countenances of the rest. He was bewildered himself. Sheriff Clyde McCants had been tough as a ten-penny nail two years ago. Now he was soft as a plowshare left too long in the forge.

With blond-headed Tim Parker, striding along the boardwalk beside him, Pierce followed the sheriff down-street. And then across the lawman's slumped shoulders, he saw the slender shape of a girl leave a store and swing up the walk toward them. Involuntarily, he stiffened as recognition came to him.

Amelia Martin, in a bright print dress, was the girl coming toward them! He'd planned to ride to the Eagle, then across country to Tom Martin's Longbow, and surprise them. Instead Amelia was in town. There'd be no better time than now to greet her.

In an awkward, stilt-heeled run, he swung out and broke past the sheriff. Fifty feet still separated them, and his hungry eyes took in every line of the girl's body and face. He'd dreamed of her on the nights when the moon had come over the mountains. Remembered the times they'd gone to neighborhood ranches in the Eagle buckboard with her hand shyly in his beneath the laprobe covering their legs. Those had been the good days, and he had vowed they'd come again.

"Amelia—" his shout had a ringing gladness in it.

The girl looked up at the sound of his voice, and one of the small bundles she was carrying slipped unheeded from her arms. Her brown eyes stared at him, and then Pierce saw her swing, and step into the street. He stopped like a man reaching a stone wall, and watched her move to the opposite curb. She did not look back. She did not speak. Automatically, he stooped and recovered her bundle, and it seemed to him that his body belonged to somebody else. There was nothing in him but numbness.

"Amelia," he whispered her name senselessly, and then he felt Clyde McCants' hand on his arm.

"Comstock," there was a gentle, kindly note in the lawman's voice, "you keep comin' right along with me. There are lots of things been happenin' around Pioneer since you rode to Deer Lodge. Mebbe I can explain a few to you when we git to my office."

Pierce walked with the sheriff, and his legs felt like a pair of broomsticks hinged together. He wondered for one crazy second if the girl hadn't recognized him, and knew that was wrong. She'd looked directly at him, and two years behind bars hadn't changed his appearance very much. No, she'd known him, and for some reason of her own had wished to avoid him. But why? Was it because he was a jail-bird now?

He found his fingers twined in the strings binding her small package, and stared at it almost stupidly. Then his vision cleared. Amelia Martin would get her purchase back, personally, and she'd have some questions to answer. So would Sheriff Clyde McCants when they reached his office. Pioneer was a mighty different town than he'd left!

The sheriff's office, with the squat, log jail-house behind it was located near the end of Pine Street. The street itself wound on to swing left beyond the end of town and head out into the rolling, hilly vastness of the Cariso Plains.

Willow Creek lay its line of greenery straight across the flat, a pair of miles beyond town, and Pierce could see the tiny shapes of men toiling like busy ants along its banks, and the shelves near it. Pierce shook his head. The thought that gold lay out there in the creek was still incredible to him.

As a kid, he'd gone swimming in its icy pools with other boys now dead. If they'd known then that gold filled its sands they'd probably all still be alive. The reflection brought a bitter taste into his mouth, and suddenly he hated the thought of digging yellow gold from dripping sands. A ranch and the free air of wide ranges was all any man needed to make him happy—that and a girl waiting his evening return.

"Come on in," McCants' voice broke the run of his thoughts. "You, too, Parker."

"You couldn't leave me behind," the blond, red-shirted miner grunted. "This fella—" he laid his hand on Comstock's

shoulder as they climbed to the porch opening into the sheriff's office—"saved my hide. I ain't the kind that forgets a thing like that!"

Sheriff McCants nodded a little abstractedly. He stumped tiredly across to his roll-top desk, settled himself in the swivel chair behind it, and gestured at a pair of straight chairs.

"Set," he suggested. "This is apt to take time."

"I was aimin' to get out and look the Eagle over quick as I could," Pierce hinted, and he saw McCants' blue eyes turn on him with an expression that was hard to read, but for a moment he said nothing. He seemed to be trying to order his thoughts.

At last he said slowly, "I dunno as I'd be too quick about doin' that. Seems like Jack Madsen owns the Eagle now—"

"MY PLACE?" Pierce was on his feet with the speed of a released spring, and the sound of the words were harsh on his lips. This was the climaxing surprise for a homecomer, and it set his brain whirling. Jack Madsen had been the other rustler chief he'd sided to hell. Bett Killen and Jack Madsen had been the two men he'd hoped not to meet in Pioneer, and already he'd made an enemy of one. Those two had condemned him to Deer Lodge more surely than had the jury. And now he was tangled with them again in less than his first hour in Pioneer!

"Set," Sheriff McCants advised again. "I ain't begun yet."

And with his knees feeling stiff, Pierce dropped again into the chair. "How could Madsen get hold of my ranch?" he asked.

The sheriff shook his graying head. "According to all reports the deal was legal enough. When yore dad knew he was dying, son, he give his friend Tom Martin full power of attorney to handle Eagle affairs until you got home to take over. Said power gave him the right to buy and

sell in the name of Eagle anything that might be turned to your advantage. Guess mebbe he figgered with the place running down, five thousand in the bank would give you more start than a hunk of run-down ranch. So—"

"So," Pierce gritted, "that might be the reason Amelia got out of our way when she saw me comin'. Dunno as I blame her. Her conscience can't be restin' very easy. As fer Madsen and Martin, them gents are goin' to be seein' me, and Madsen's going to get his five thousand crammed down his throat. My dad fought Injuns and hard winters to build the Eagle, and it's going to take more than Madsen to keep me from getting it back!"

Something verging on a smile touched McCants' lips beneath his mustache, but he changed the subject without comment. "Gold was found along Willow Creek near six months back," he drawled, "and the news brought Pioneer three thousand new residents quicker'n you can say scat. A rush like this brings the good and bad. The honest hombres willing to work for what they get are always in the majority, but the camp-followers are always the toughest. They're the lads a man has got to watch. We lost Jim Crossen while he was doing that."

Jim Crossen had been McCants' deputy for a half dozen years. A likeable man with a pretty wife and two mighty fine youngsters. Pierce felt the muscles across his high cheekbones tauten. It was hell when a family man had to pack a gun, and run up against gold-camp killers. His eyes fell on Crossen's holstered Colt and gunbelt slung from a peg in the wall behind the sheriff. Cobwebs covered it like a pale shroud. Pierce studied the weapon, and the terms of his parole came like a shock. Until another year was up he could not strap a gun about his own waist.

"Yeah," he heard the sheriff drawling, "some hombre put lead through the back

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of Jim's haid when he was in Killen's Discovery breakin' up a rough-house. Warn't no way of tellin' who done it, because the lights were out."

It was on the tip of Pierce's tongue to blurt out the names of the two men who had led him and a pack of green youngsters to hell, but again he held the words. Two years was a long time, and a trail that cold would be hard to follow. A man could bet that Killen and Madsen would have iron-clad alibis for that long ago night.

"Go on," he said tensely.

The sheriff nodded. "Trouble is starting out along the Creek these days, too. Funny trouble, and it's helped to make an old man of me."

"What do you mean, 'funny'?" Pierce asked.

"Tain't the usual kind that hits a diggings," the sheriff responded. "Mostly you'll find the claim jumpers active, and dead men alongside their claims. This time the fellers are complainin' of making it back to their claims after spending an evening here in town, and then sleepin' so sound that they jest don't wake up till mebbe noon the next day. And while they're sleeping their tents are ripped up, supplies scattered from hell to breakfast, picks and shovels broken, and gold pans punched full of holes. Thing that makes it funny is that more'n once the vandals have uncovered pokes of dust and left 'em lay. So robbery don't seem to be the reason for the things that have been going on."

"It don't look like I was robbed of the Eagle either," Pierce drawled, "but it belongs to Jack Madsen now! Tell me something, Clyde. Does them fellers who sleep so hard buy their red-eye in the Discovery?"

"I know what you're thinkin'," the sheriff nodded, "but it don't add up that way. Seems to come out of every saloon in Pioneer."

"I'd figure it a mighty quick way to lose business," Pierce said slowly. "Danged if I'd drink a second time where I got a Mickey tossed at me."

McCants shrugged. "Yuh can't tell where they come from. Folks mill around, bar tuh bar. But I do know it's happened often enough to some fellers to make 'em pull up stakes and leave some mighty rich claims behind them."

"Who steps in to take them over?" Pierce asked. His interest in the sheriff's talk had been quickening by the minute.

The lawman chuckled, and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Nobody!" he grunted. "Figure that one out."

Pierce shook his head. "You know the answer to that well as me," he answered. "The cusses pulling this stunt are too smart to walk right in, and they know any honest prospector will be afeard to because the same thing will happen to him. Their aim is to clean the Creek, man by man, and then take over the hull diggings! Mighty big plans they got, Clyde, and the only thing working in your favor is time."

"Time?"

"Time," Pierce nodded. "They can't skeer everybody off at once. They got to whittle. And whittlin' is slow work. Somebody might make a slip while it's goin' on."

A smile had moved the lawman's mustache briefly as the homecomer talked. "Pierce," he drawled, "we seem to see kind of eye to eye on this business. Figgured we would."

Pierce Comstock's head came up abruptly. "What are you drivin' at Clyde?"

The lawman deliberated for the length of time it took him to build a cigarette! When he was finished he gestured at the cobwebbed Colt on the wall. "Seems like I remember you and Jim Crossen were fair friends."

"We were," Pierce answered, and felt tightness in his muscles.

"Put me to some trouble to get you out of Deer Lodge," Clyde McCants continued, "but I figgered you might like to tack his gun on your hip. Yuh won't wear one for a year less'n you use it to side the law!"

CHAPTER THREE

Gulch Meeting

PIERCE tipped his head back and laughed. The sound rang bitterly to the smoky rafters. "Clyde," he said, "I saw first off that you'd changed. But I didn't think yore brains were addled. What would people think of a sheriff hiring a jail-bird deputy?"

"Plenty jail-birds have made damned good lawmen in the past, son," McCants

said slowly. "They remember what it's like to spend a share of their years behind bars, and they don't want any more of it."

"Nor me," Pierce said quietly. Then: "You mean," the thought was still hard to believe, "that you got me paroled into your custody figgerin' I'd fill Jim's shoes?"

McCants shrugged, and that light smile moved his mustaches again. "Tim, here," he said grimly, "is about the only man in town I feel like trusting. I'm fighting with my back to adobe, son, and makin' so leetle headway that nobody's got much use for me any more. Appointin' a jail-bird deputy won't do any harm—and your fresh slant on things might do some good."

Pierce nodded. "Sometimes," he spoke to the quietly waiting men, "a gent's got to fight for what he wants. Polish up a star, Clyde, and hand me down Jim's gun. My first chore is going to take me to Eagle, and my second—" his lips twisted a little—"will be carryin' a package to the Longbow. Madsen's in this thing along with Killen, you can lay to that. I'll start with him, makin' it look like my interest is all Eagle. That way mebbe I can learn something."

McCants' face was somber as he climbed from his chair. "We've got nothing to lose," he said. "We're down to bedrock now."

"When you get that low," Pierce told him quietly, "you got to bounce back because you can't go no lower!"

With one of the sheriff's own mounts beneath him, Pierce headed along the Plains road an hour later, and Jim Crossen's Colt was a comfortable weight against his thigh. So was the star pinned to the pocket of his shirt, and he grinned a little as he remembered the expression of surprise that had touched Bett Killen's face as he'd ridden the length of the street, "just to let folks know you're backin' me—" McCants had said.

The sheriff had had more reason than that, Pierce guessed, but he hadn't expressed the thought. The aging lawman's chief interest had been to let folks know that *he* was backing the paroled homecomer. There were other faces besides Bett Killen's that had showed surprise and interest. A few had even brightened.

Riding with him, Clyde McCants had noted the expressions with grim irony, and

murmured: "Things have gone pretty tough for me around here ever since gold was discovered and the honkatonk crowd came in. They're organized behind Killen. And with a dozen gun-toughs to back him he's got this town buffaloed. Men his crowd don't like have been ending up in boot hill pretty regular, or taking a ride over the hill. And since claims have been getting wrecked so regular, the decent element in this town have lost faith in me. I know some of 'em have been thinkin' of getting out a recall petition, and I dunno as I'd blame 'em if they did. The things I know I can't prove, and Killen is making the most of it. I've got me a hunch he'd like to be next sheriff of Pioneer!"

Pierce chuckled a little grimly. "I imagine he would, Clyde, but there's things I know that might change his mind. However, I can't prove anything—yet."

The sheriff had nodded. "Tim Parker is my undercover man out at the Creek," he had explained. "He's wearin' his star inside his boot, and he makes a good deputy. You'll be working pretty close to him when you get back from Eagle."

A better partner, Pierce decided now, could probably not be asked for. And a better lawman than Clyde McCants didn't live in this end of Montana. But if he was going to hold that job long, the three of them would have to do some fast moving. As for his own life, Pierce could foresee no future for himself if Bett Killen gained the law-reins in Pioneer.

"So I got a stake big as the rest," he muttered aloud, and his thoughts reverted to the bloody night two years before when five youngsters had died, and one had been captured. Off across the rolling, pine-studded plain to westward he could see the hills where the sheriff had laid his rustler trap. To the east lay Eagle, and bending north was Tom Martin's Longbow. The impulse was hard in him to veer directly for his home ranch, but a power even stronger seemed to be turning the bay under him toward the hills where death had almost tagged him.

It wasn't likely that a man could learn anything after two years, but he had an hour or more before dusk, and evening would be soon enough to pay Madsen a visit.

He was into the fringe of hills in thirty

minutes, automatically finding a grass-grown trail that led along the narrow, twisty gut of Rustler Gulch. The stubby pines on the side-walls, even the boulders fanging upward from the red soil brought memories back to him. It had been a night of storm when they'd brought their herd along here, and Jack Madsen had laughed through the scarf wound about his head.

"This is rustlin' weather, boys," he'd called. "You don't need to worry about the law bein' out this kind of night—"

It had come then as they'd rounded the rocky bend right ahead of him, a hail of lead far more wicked than the vicious slash of sleet. Shadowy shapes of his young friends on either side had plunged silently from their mounts, dead before they struck the ground. And then a great flash had knocked the sight from his own eyes. Later they were to tell him that only the heavy cap he'd been wearing had deflected the bullet enough to crease instead of kill him. Right then it hadn't seemed to make much difference. Now it made a heap. Hell was on the loose all across the Cariso Plains, and it was going to be up to him, an aging sheriff, and a bright-eyed Irish prospector to stem it.

Lightning had flashed in the sky just a moment before the red blackness had crossed his consciousness, and as clearly as though it had only happened he remembered the flashing jab of Jack Madsen's initialed spurs sinking into the flanks of his mount as he'd turned back, ducking low across his saddle.

The next day Madsen and Killen had both dropped in to visit him at the jail as ostensible friends. Actually, their call had been to warn him that there was more than one way for a man to die, and Bett Killen's black eyes had rested significantly on the bars of his cell window that looked out on a vacant lot. Pierce had nodded, and been willing to button his tongue. A man stayed dead a long time. Three years was something you could lose and still have plenty left.

Jack Madsen had been wearing a flashy new pair of silver-mounted spurs, Pierce remembered, and he wondered now if the shank of one he'd had on the night before might have broken at the wicked jab he'd made into his mount's flanks. . . .

Grass layered the narrow canyon floor,

and Pierce looked at it with a grunt. If Madsen had lost a spur, he'd been back long before now to search it out. And then Pierce recalled something else. Water had been running through the canyon. Not much, but enough to hide tracks, enough mebbe to carry a spur this far from the bend where death had reached for them.

"You're a bigger fool than I ever figgered you," Pierce Comstock told himself as he climbed down from the bay, and drop-reined it. On aimless feet, he started wandering about the canyon floor, kicking at tufts of grass, and half-hidden stones. Then one small thread of excitement started to stir him. Unless some evidence that could incriminate them had been left behind Madsen and Killen wouldn't have paid him a jail visit to halt his tongue until they'd had time to close-check this coulee. And Bett Killen was still ready to kill him. "Mebbe you ain't the fool you been figgerin'—"

A shelf of sand had built up behind two of the more deeply imbedded boulders. Pierce started scraping at it with one boot after a calculating glance up-canyon. Yes, the stream trickling through here that night might have been strong enough to roll a spur rowl this far. But two winters had passed, and thickened the sand. A broken bit of driftwood lay to one side. He caught it up and started to scrape away the rubble. Metal grated against the stick, then flipped into view. It was a rust-caked spur, snapped off at the shank!

Pierce stared at it for a moment like a man struck blind. If it had come from Jack Madsen's boot silver polish would prove it, by bringing out the initials on its shank. It was something the sheriff would be glad to see, Pierce thought bleakly.

The spur was in his pocket, and he was in saddle when he heard the muffled sound of hoofs rounding the bend just in front of him. The bay snorted, and instinctively Pierce lifted his head.

Jack Madsen's broad-boned, smooth face met his gaze. Four riders rode behind him. Pierce saw recognition narrow Madsen's eyes. The new Eagle owner's lips were tipped downward at the corners in the caricature of a smile. His riders, as though they were well-trained in this sort of thing were spreading wide to either side of their chief so they could catch the homecomer in a cross-fire.

Pierce recognized the maneuver, and his hand moved with lazy speed to the Colt at his hip. The muzzle moved like a snake to cover the Eagle riders.

CHAPTER FOUR

Longbow Trouble

"STICK together, boys," Pierce advised. "Your boss and I have talk to make and now might be just as good a time as any."

Jack Madsen's eyes flicked contemptuously over the weapon in the homcomer's hand. "Ain't you cuttin' a kind of wide trail for a gent just out of jail? Seems almost like there'd be a parole involved, concernin' the carryin' of guns."

Pierce's dark eyes were mocking as the other's as he unbuttoned his coat. Against the blue of his shirt, the silver brightness of his badge was like the hue of the snow that had touched this coulee on a night long past.

"Deputies usually wear 'em," he drawled. "Now let's talk about Eagle."

Madsen's face smoothed. "Much water under the bridge," he murmured. "Things change. Your dad thought Tom Martin was just the man to handle Eagle affairs. I come along and made Tom the kind of offer he couldn't turn down. Yore dad had been ailin' for quite a spell before he died, and those two-bit prospectors along Willow Creek were eating Eagle beef right regular. Tom figured it was smarter to sell and have some cash for you instead of empty acres."

"You fellows were sure almighty thoughtful," Pierce grunted, and anger was beginning to burn deep in his chest. "'Course you wouldn't like to sell back to me for what you paid?"

"Well now," Madsen half-twisted in his saddle, and scuffed his hat back from dark brown hair. It gave him a straight view of the pit the homcomer had dug behind the twin boulders, and Pierce saw Madsen's hand seem to freeze in mid-air.

"Slug," the order went to one of his Eagle riders, "I want this cuss. Pronto. He's been nosin'—"

They were five to one and they were men not afraid of open guns. One of them was laughing as he quirted his mount to one side. They were scattering like quail to

cut off his retreat, and force him to hole up right here in the open where cross-fire lead could either cut him down or force his surrender.

The first faint powdering of dusk seeping down from the rim of the coulee was his only aid. That, and then Pierce started to grin as he looked straight ahead. No one was in front of him. For some reason, Madsen had taken it for granted that he'd try and back-track, not ride forward.

A bullet gashed the tawny wall alongside him, and a hail of lead followed it. "Sit tight, Comstock," Madsen's yell came to him. "You're too young to die."

"That's what you told me once before," Pierce flung back. He was forward along the leggy bay's neck, and the big animal was stretched in a low run straight through the coulee, the rolling beat of its hoofs answering the howl of following lead.

Around the bend from which Madsen had come was something that made Pierce blink but there was no time now to try and figure it out. Inside the shelter of a ramshackle shed was something that looked like a sled with a tower tall enough to support the gear and blades of a windmill. A forge stood to one side, and someone working at it had fashioned metal cups that were attached to the windmill blades.

It was all he had time to see for the speed of his ride had carried him on past the shed before pursuit came into view behind him. He paid it little attention. The bay could distance those following riders, and there were other things on his mind now.

The Eagle could wait, Pierce thought as the bay carried him northward toward the Longbow. Jack Madsen had told him enough for a beginning. Martin might be able to add a little more, and then he'd be ready for a talk with Judge Powers in Pioneer.

Celia Martin's package bumped his knee, and the feel of it stiffened the recklessness of the smile the chase had put on his lips. Maybe he could guess now why the girl had crossed the street at sight of him. She was ashamed for it looked from Madsen's talk as though old Tom Martin had turned crooked just to cut himself a slice of the Eagle.

That was the way it looked, all right, but was it the answer? Pierce asked himself the question as he rode, and the answer

stuck in his throat. The Eagle was good graze, a prosperous ranch by the gauge of this Cariso Plains neighborhood, but was it worth the risk of jail or death?

"And that's something I'll try and find out from Martin," he promised himself. "Might be he'll also know something about that queer contraption back in that shed."

A FULL dark brought the golden touch of lamp light through ranch windows, Pierce rode into the Longbow yard. Above the mountains to eastward, a full, rich moon was rising, and muscle ridged Pierce's jaw as he eyed it. Many nights behind bars he'd pictured the home-coming this would be, with Celia in his arms, and lanky old Tom sucking his pipe and beaming in the back-ground.

Instead, the girl's package was heavy as the lump of his own heart as he swung down before the wide verandah and started to mount the steps. A white shadow came from the left as he reached porch level, and a voice murmured, "Pierce," softly. The warmth of the girl against him was a shock he'd never expected. As she stepped back, they were both breathless. Her body was a pale blur in front of him. He reached hungrily for her, then drew his arms back even before she spoke.

"No," she said hurriedly, "there'll be time for that. Right now—"

"Right now," he told her quietly, "your dad is the man I want to see."

"I don't doubt it!" the girl answered surprisingly. "I'd like to see him myself! Oh, Pierce, I couldn't talk to you this afternoon, and I couldn't talk to the sheriff. All I could hope for was to make you mad enough to come out here to the Longbow where I could see you alone."

"Pierce," she went on, "I'm afraid the Longbow has met the same end as your Eagle. Banker Mendenhall, passing the time of day with me this afternoon asked jokingly what type of persuasion Jack Madsen had used on my father to buy the Longbow for just what he'd paid for that jail-bird's spread—"

"So folks are callin' me that—" Pierce began, and then he controlled himself. It didn't matter a tinker's dam what Pioneer people called him. He had a badge that gave him authority to search out the answers to problems that grew by the hour.

"So your dad has sold the Longbow to Madsen," he said slowly.

"Evidently," the girl answered wearily. "You know he, he sometimes goes to town and gets drunk. Two days ago, he disappeared, and I—I thought he had gone to Pioneer and taken a hotel room. That's the main reason I went to town today, to locate him. But he wasn't in Pioneer—hadn't been there."

"Yet he'd signed a deed to the Longbow?" Pierce murmured.

"One must have been recorded, or Mr. Mendenhall wouldn't have known about it," the girl answered.

Pierce nodded jerkily, and he was thinking fast. "Your dad sold me out, and it was a hard thing to believe."

"I—I've had the feeling ever since that he was forced into that, too," Celia Martin said flatly.

"Double on the Longbow," Pierce murmured. "For some reason Madsen, and you can bet Killen's in it with him, want the Longbow and Eagle. And not because it's good graze. Those two are quick money boys. They're playin' this game high wide and handsome—" his voice faded, and his thoughts were reverting to the afternoon, and the ride he'd made past the abandoned shed.

"Your dad was always a pretty handy blacksmith warn't he?" Pierce asked.

"Yes," the girl answered. "Why—"

Pierce ignored her question. "He been spendin' lots of time lately with Madsen?"

There was harshness in the girl's reply. "One of their men has done everything but sleep with dad since he sold your place to Madsen. I don't know why—and I guess dad can't say. Oh, Pierce, there is so much going on that we know nothing about—"

"And won't learn here," Pierce grunted. "I'm heading for Pioneer and Willow Creek."

"Not alone," Celia said calmly. "I've got fresh horses saddled and waiting down in the barn. Don't argue with me, mister. It looks like the Martins have been jiggerooed as badly as the Comstocks, and I for one intend to see a pair of deeds torn up and crammed down someone's throat!"

They had been walking toward the barn, leading Pierce's fagged mount as the girl talked, and he'd been absently fingering the rusty spur he'd found in the coulee, but it

hadn't been in his thoughts, for once again that odd windmill being built in that abandoned shed was in his mind.

"So your dad has been spending quite a bit of time with Madsen men," he repeated slowly, "and he's a good blacksmith. Celia," he asked the girl as they moved into the dark runway of the barn, "have you ever seen a kind of portable windmill strap-ironed to a sled? One your dad might be building out in the hills?"

"She ain't, but she will," a sardonic voice said from one of the side-stalls behind the home-comer. "Likely you'll get a better look at it yourself, if you use your haid and unlace that hog-laig!"

A sack jerked from a lantern across the runway, sprayed light over them. Alone, in a quick shoot-out, Pierce knew he might have a chance, but he dared not risk it with Celia so close beside him.

Slowly, he lifted his hands shoulder-high. Celia had not moved. She was still a half pace in front and to one side. Her face looked stiff in the lantern light.

The stocky gunnie he'd dropped with his fists in Pioneer came from the stall on the left. Kaoky he'd called himself, and his puffy lips were smiling thinly. "Comstock," he drawled, "I told yuh we'd be seein' more of each other. Nobody K. O.'s Kaoky and gets away with it!"

As they reached the shed in the White Feather Hills, Pierce's ears caught the solid ring of a smith's hammer on hot iron. He glanced at Celia riding beside him, and from behind came Kaoky's taunting voice.

"Go on in," he invited. "You'll find your dad inside—"

Pierce whirled the long-legged bay the girl had saddled for him. If he was going to get away now was the moment. He had planned the move since leaving Longbow, figuring that when they reached the shed Kaoky's attention would be momentarily diverted from them. And he was right. He saw it as he got the bay turned. Kaoky's face in the moonlight showed surprise. His hand clawed toward his Colt, and then the bay was between them, and into the shadows of the coulee. Lead followed, but it was wide. Then he was around the bend where he had found the spur.

Bound hands clumsy with the reins, Pierce drove his Longbow mount across the Cariso Plains, and he was still trying to

figure out the purpose to which that windmill would be put. Time might answer the question, but time was short. Shorter even than he'd guessed, Pierce found as he reached Pioneer. . . .

Clyde McCants was riding Pine Street, tall, and austere in his saddle. The evening was quiet, but there was the feeling of tension in the air, like the tautness before a storm.

At sight of his bound hands on the reins, the sheriff turned his deputy with a quick nod. "Get back to the office. Keep those hands out of sight. They're just the ticket to start the pot boiling."

Pierce rode as well as he could, and as they turned he noticed that McCants had a stub-barreled shotgun across the bow of his saddle. "What's the reason for that?" he queried softly.

The sheriff laughed shortly. "It's about the only badge left that folks respect. Didn't take long for Killen to get out a recall petition, once you showed up. He's had copies circulating all over town ever since you pulled out for the Eagle. Meantime, daylight raiders with masks on their faces stripped just about every claim along Willow Creek. They hit so fast that all Tim could do was lay low. I'd say twenty-five thousand in dust was their take. I rode out, but hell you might as well try and trail a covey of quail. That ain't helped my chances any. Killen is in The Discovery now, passing out cigars, and telling the miners he'd see they'd get protection if he was sheriff."

They were swinging down before the lawman's office as McCants finished speaking. Pierce laughed. "Cut this damned rawhide off my wrists, and mebbe we'll make Bett sing a different tune. I hope you got fresh brones in your corral. We're going to need 'em—"

"Are we now?" Tim Parker was lounging in the doorway.

Pierce swung toward the deputy.

"We are," he said shortly, as the sheriff's knife slit the bonds from his wrists. His hand slipped inside his shirt, and a rusty spur rowel struck the sheriff's desk.

"Clean that up," he drawled, "and I wouldn't be surprised but what you might find Jack Madsen's initials on it. I found that spur, Clyde, out where you and some of the boys were waiting for a pack of rustlers a couple of years back!"

The sheriff nodded, and his pale eyes were intent.

"Two of your rustlers got away," Pierce went on. "That spur gives you the name of one of them. I can give you the other. But now ain't the right time. There's a whole hog game being played here, and I think that day-light raid gives me the last answer I've been needing. It tells us why Killen and Madsen have worked it around to take over the Longbow and Eagle!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Gold at the Grass-Roots

FEET thumped on the porch outside, and a townsman skidded through the doorway. The man's face and voice were scared. "Sheriff, trouble's coming to a head. Killen has poured enough free whisky into the Willow Creek miners to about convince them that they'd better come and take over the jail, and name their own law. Judge Powers, Killen is tellin' them, will back any man they name. There's a good hundred or more millin' around down there right now with more joinin' up every minute. They'll be heading this way mup pronto!"

Pierce jerked his head at the townsman before McCants could speak. "Can you trust this hombre, Clyde?" he asked bluntly.

The sheriff nodded. "Yes— But—"

"Then listen, all of you," Pierce snapped, "and you'll get your questions answered. I've got to backtrack so you'll get the whole picture. This afternoon I headed for Eagle, and the chief thing that kept worrying me was *why* Madsen had wanted my place so much. On the way, I took time to turn off and take a ride into the White Feather Hills. Yeah," Pierce's lips twisted, "I went to look over the spot where five kids died a couple of years back, and I found a heap sight more than I'd bargained on. One was Madsen, and some of his hands. They tried to take me, but I got around the bend where they'd been. There's an old shed back in there, Clyde, if you'll remember."

"I remember," McCants nodded.

Pierce went on, "Queerest contraption inside it you ever did see. Sort of a wind-mill, strap-ironed to a big sled. On each

blade there's something like a metal cup."

"Why in tarnation would anybody want to rig up a contraption like that?" the sheriff asked.

"That's what I've been asking myself ever since I saw it," Pierce grunted, "and you gave me the answer when you told me there'd been a day-light raid on the Willow Creek diggings."

"I can't see the tie-in," McCants said in puzzled tones. "Damme if I can."

Pierce chuckled, but his eyes were bleak. "Clyde, the dust those daylight raiders picked up is going into the cups on that wind-mill, a little bit at a time. When they take that outfit into the open and turn it loose that gold will be scattered like seed all across Longbow and Eagle range. It'll be the biggest saltin' job ever pulled in Montana."

"And bein' on private property Madsen will sell the claims for as neat a profit as a man could pick up. If the gold peters out, it won't be his fault, and nobody will be able to prove anything against him once the salting job is finished. All the other stunts they've been pulling in town here and out along the Creek, have been to keep you busy, and close to own. This is what it's all been leading up to—a grass-roots salting job that will make Killen and Madsen rich."

The lines had deepened in the sheriff's face as Pierce talked. "I think you're right," he admitted. "But take it a step farther. Bett's discredited me. He'll be settin' here in my office to back Madsen in case any swindled prospector gets hot under the collar."

"Not unless you want him to," Pierce said slowly.

"You and Tim and I can't buck a hundred men," McCants said briefly.

"Mebbe we won't have to," Pierce went on, and a plan of action had come into his mind. He swung his glance full on the townsman. "Fella, here is yore chore. Go back to The Discovery and start yelling, *Gold, Gold at the grassroots!* Tell the crowd you overheard me passin' the news to Clyde hyar that I'd found it out in the White Feather Hills, along Rustler Gulch."

Tim Parker was chuckling, white Irish teeth gleaming. "Shades of the Pied Piper—" he drawled. "Comestock, if those howling miners find that wind-mill—"

"I'm hoping they'll find more than that," Pierce said, and his face was like flint. "Jack Madsen, mebbe, and Kaoky, and some Willow Creek gold ready for salting—"

The townsman's lips were working. "Lord a mighty," he kept muttering, "you want for me to do this, sheriff?"

"Right, Ben," McCants was grinning tightly. "Killen won't be able to stop you. He's started a fire with his rot-gut. Let him try and put it out!"

"And the Pied Piper led the children from Hamlin town," Tim Parker murmured. "Begorra, and look at 'em go. Every man-jack able to set a horse. Night or day, you tell your prospector that gold's been found across the hill, and he'll drop everything and head for it—"

It was a stampede along Pine Street. A general exodus. Sitting a fresh mount in the thick dark beside the jail, Pierce watched the streaming riders. Most of them were drunk and shouting. They'd be in an ugly mood by the time they reached Rustler Gulch.

Smiling tightly, Pierce glanced at the sheriff. "Killen's not with them," he said flatly. "He'll be doing his damndest to cut across country and warn Madsen."

"So we've got to do *our* damndest to beat him," McCants murmured.

"It'll be no easy race," Tim Parker warned. "Let's get to riding!"

There were good horses under them, and three men could follow trails into the White Feather Hills that a hundred couldn't take.

"We'll beat the rush," Pierce said an hour later.

"But mebbe not Killen," Tim Parker reminded, "and he's the one to head. Won't take 'em long to bust up their windmill, and hide the gold they've stolen. And Tom Martin won't do any talking. He can't, and stay alive."

Pierce thought of Celia. The girl was with her father now. Both helpless. They had to be saved!

The moon was high over their heads now, lighting the Cariso Plains and White Feather Hills with almost daylight brilliance. The hills were looming close ahead now.

"No sign of Killen, and his Discovery gunnies," Tim Parker said. "They ahead or behind us?"

"That's something we'll have to find out," Clyde McCants said flatly.

Pierce wondered if he was remembering the night Rustler Gulch had gained its name—when five boys looking for adventure had met death. "Killen," he said quietly, "and Jack Madsen were our leaders."

"I know," the lawman said. "Have for a long time. But you've got to be able to prove things like that. The spur you picked up will help convict them."

Pierce nodded, and drew rein on the ridge above Rustler Gulch. With the moon high above them it was like pausing on the rim of an amphitheatre, with the stage laid out below them. The shadowy gut of the wash. The rickety shed with a red glow of fire inside it, silhouetting the weird windmill strapped to its sled. Four horses were hitched to it, and Pierce could see that Tom Martin had evidently completed his task.

Riders appeared below them as those thoughts were crossing Pierce's mind. He recognized Bett Killen's tall, black-garbed shape as the man whipped from the shadows in the Gulch. He was here to warn Madsen of the prospectors coming. Pierce swung his head to study the Cariso Plains, and the moon showed him black dots on the shining prairie floor.

"They're coming," he said. "Hell bent for damnation, and I guess it's up to us to see they got something to look at when they get here." He was drawing his Winchester from its saddle boot as he spoke, and snugging it against his shoulder. "I hate to kill good horses," he said briefly, "but if we don't they'll get that team away."

"You're right at that," the sheriff said. "No," the word came easily from Tim Parker who had maneuvered unobtrusively behind them. "Whole hog or none, that's me. You boys drop those rifles. Nobody is goin' to bust up Killen's game at this late date!"

PIERCE sighed, and he let his shoulders sag. Rifle close to his lean middle, he twisted slowly in his saddle. "Tim," he said almost pleasantly, "a man never knows who he can trust, does he?"

Tim Parker's white teeth flashed. "Not where gold is concerned, amigo."

"And now it's finished," Pierce said, and his rifle was clatter-downward toward the

ground, as his right hand swept back against his Colt. His dropping rifle caught Tim Parker's eye momentarily, and he felt the solid butt of the Colt rise against his palm. The gun's heavy report seemed to lift and twist Parker from his saddle.

"Ah—" the deputy sighed, and he tried to lift his rifle as he toppled to earth, "we played a little game to trap a homecomer this morning and everything has gone wrong since. Comstock the luck is all yours!"

Tim Parker was dying, but there were live men and one girl down in Rustler Gulch below them. Men who had been warned by the sound of Comstock's Colt.

Pierce spotted Killen's white shirt front down there below them, and the tall, gaunt shape of Tom Martin pinwheeling from the shed. The stocky Kaoky was following him, long whip poised in one hand, urging Tom Martin onto the sled.

Pierce caught his rifle from the ground, and took deliberate aim at one of them. "I hate to kill good horses," he murmured again, "but it's the only way to keep that outfit there long enough for those prospectors to get a squirt at it."

One of the lead team dropped as he fired, and he could hear Bett Killen's thin curse rise to them. Then the sound was drowned by the deeper rumble of hoofs out on the sounding board of the Cariso Plains.

The prospectors were coming, a long, curving line and they were already close enough to have heard the sound of firing up ahead. Pierce cradled the rifle again, and laid lead into the Gulch. The sheriff's Winchester was echoing his own.

"Celia's down there, someplace."

Pierce's face was gaunt and drawn. "I know that," he said simply, "but she wouldn't think much of our guts if we let those hombres get away."

Lead from Killen rifles cut his words short. Tim Parker's mount fell as a bullet smashed through its skull.

"Gettin' hot up here," McCants grunted.

Pierce gestured toward boulders to one side. "Cover," he growled. "We've got to keep them busy."

After that it was gun-flash matching gun-flash as that long, shouting black line drew closer across the Plains. Pierce watched them stream into the gulch.

He grinned sidelong at the sheriff.

"Danged if I ain't goin' back to Deer Lodge," he grunted. "Leastways a man gets peace there!"

"And mebbe we will here after those Willow Creek lads get done with Killen and Madsen," the sheriff answered. "If we don't get down there we won't have anything left to take to jail!"

"Bueno," Pierce approved. He swung to saddle and as they cut down the slant to the canyon floor, his hands thoughtfully found the riata thonged to the pommel of his saddle. It was something that might prove more useful than a Colt.

As they descended, Pierce watched the milling crowd at the shack. The Discovery owner and Jack Madsen had backed against the shed, and a loud-mouthed prospector was demanding an explanation of the windmill mounted on the sled.

"What in Hades is that contraption, Killen?" he was shouting.

Another yelled, "Killen, it looks to me like you got some tall explainin' to do—"

Pierce saw Celia Martin come to the doorway of the shed, and his heart skipped. Her hands were bound, but otherwise she seemed unharmed.

"Yes, I'll tell you," her words came clearly to all of them. "I can do it simply enough. Jack Madsen has planted evidence on the Longbow to prove that my father was the leader of the rustler bunch that escaped Clyde McCants' trap that he laid right here in this gulch two years ago. With that hanging over his head, dad's had to do what they asked."

"And he'll still go to Deer Lodge!" Bett Killen snapped.

"That's something for the courts to prove," the girl said steadily, and she gestured at Pierce and the sheriff as they rode to the outskirts of the throng. "The courts and the law. This much I can tell you. These men were planning on using this apparatus to sow gold-dust across Longbow and Eagle. Then they'd start the story about grass-roots gold, sell you claims and clean up a quick fortune. But—but something must have gone wrong with their plan. You came much too soon to suit them—"

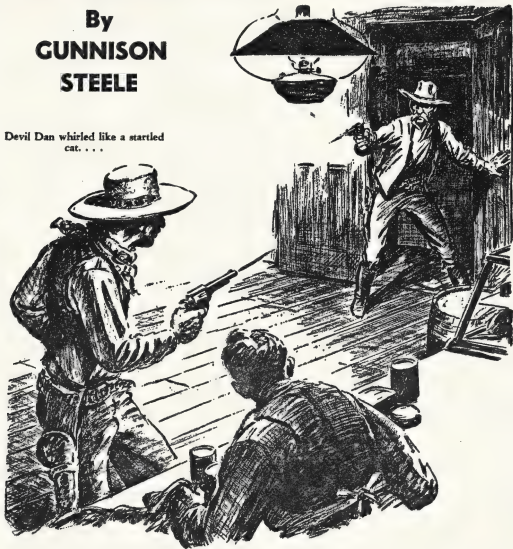
"Let's give Pierce credit for that," Clyde McCants drawled.

(Please continue on page 113)

A SAGE and HIS SIXES

By
**GUNNISON
STEELE**

Devil Dan whirled like a startled
cat. . . .



With powerful interests sitting in judgment upon him, Marshal John Drake made a hazardous stand to prove his loyalty to the star.



THE sun had gone down and shadows were creeping down from the crimson peaks, and a wintry wind prowled among Ute Gap's frame buildings. Town Marshal "Little John" Drake, sitting alone in his shadowy office, shivered a little and stared bitterly out a window at a shaft of light he could see down the street apiece and across from his office.

The light shone from a window of the town hall. There Mayor Sam Teak and the town councilmen were waiting for Lit-

tle John to appear. That afternoon Mayor Teak had told Little John, "I've called a meeting for tonight, Little John. It concerns you, and it's pretty important that you attend. At six o'clock."

Little John hadn't been told the purpose of the meeting, but he had a pretty good idea. There'd been a lot of talk lately, especially since he'd let "Devil Dan" Taggart escape from his jail a month ago.

They said he was getting too old, getting too slow with his guns and his brain. It didn't seem to matter that he'd followed Devil Dan deep into the badlands to capture him; that Devil Dan had tricked him with a hideout gun and would have killed him if he moved crooked.

Mostly, it was the youngsters doing the talking. They saw him merely as a runty, walrus-mustached old coot who liked to loaf in the sun. They didn't know that with cold nerve and a pair of fast guns he'd helped build Ute Gap in a howling wilderness and made it a safe place for honest, decent folks to live. They said he was a has-been, and the town needed a new, young marshal.

Footsteps sounded on the walk outside, paused, and somebody pushed open the door. A voice said, "Marshal?" and Little John recognized it as that of Ben Tolbert, a town councilman.

"Well, what is it?" Little John asked testily.

"We're waitin' for you over at the town hall."

"Well, jest keep on waitin'!"

"You sick or somethin'?"

"No, dang it, I ain't sick! Can't you hold a meetin' without me?"

"I reckon—well, I don't know. It sort of concerns you, you might say. We decided to—uh—well . . . you comin'?"

Little John said bitterly, "Yeah, I'll be there—but I aim to take my own good time about it!"

Tolbert closed the door and went back along the street. Little John hunkered down deeper in his chair. Tolbert, and most other town officials, were old-timers; they should have better sense. But apparently they had forgotten those other days, forty years ago, when Ute Gap was young.

Ute Gap, a lusty young giant, drunk on new-found gold and whiskey and blood; a roaring, swaggering young giant, spawned

overnight, seething with strutting, quick-tempered men. Wild days and red nights, filled with the fierce love of fighting and living and laughing.

And young John Drake, who had brought order out of chaos. Small in stature, big in the eyes of other men. Square and honest, but with fierce hatred for all outlaws, he ruled Ute Gap. Later, when the gold petered out and Ute Gap became just an ordinary cowtown, he'd stayed on. He'd kept the peace, never faltering in his unending fight against lawlessness, never considering his own safety or comfort when danger threatened.

Now the town had forgotten all that. They were kicking him out. Little John wasn't worried about money; he'd laid back plenty to buy him a little outfit. It was the injustice of it—of having old friends turn on him—that was like gall inside him. It made anger rise darkly inside him. He unpinned his badge in the shadows.

He muttered, "Well, they won't have to fire me—I'll cram this badge down their gullets!" He got up, jammed on his hat, opened the door and went out.

It was dark now, and the chill wind grabbed sharply at him. A rider was coming slowly along the street. He paused from force of habit, watching the shadowy rider, and saw him stop at a rack in the darkness fifty yards along the street. Then Little John stepped into the street, boots silent in the dust, and angled across toward the town hall. The rider was moving along the street—not on the board walk but, like Little John, silently in the dust.

That was queer. Then the rider darted quickly across a shaft of light from a saloon window. And Little John stopped suddenly. He'd seen the prowler plainly—a burly man, with dark, hawkish features and cruel little eyes: Devil Dan Taggart!

Devil Dan slid on through the shadows, and Little John saw him turn in at Bide Dudley's general merchandise store, open the door and glide inside. Little John drew his gun and started running along the street. Then he slowed, stopped.

What did he care if Devil Dan was loose in town?

IN just a few minutes he wouldn't be marshal. He had, in fact, already resigned, for the badge he'd unpinned was in

his pocket. Devil Dan was a killer, a human wolf, with dozens of crimes charged against him. He'd likely sneaked into town for provisions, and meant to take them from Bide Dudley.

For forty years Little John had been paid for just that: To protect the town and its citizens. But now they were kicking him out. They thought he'd outlived his usefulness. Well, by gosh, let them stop Devil Dan—if they could! It was no skin off his nose if Devil Dan, or a dozen of his kind, tore the town apart.

He walked on, slowly, like a man leaning into a strong wind. He thought bitterly, *thirty years ago I would have done different; maybe they're right—maybe I am gettin' old.* He crossed a yellow ribbon of light. He reached Bide Dudley's store, kicked open the door and leaped inside with drawn gun.

Bide was behind the counter, white-faced, shoving canned goods into a gunnysack. Devil Dan stood half-facing the door, a gun in his hand. As the door crashed inward, Devil Dan whirled, snarling like a startled cat, his gun blazing and roaring.

But Little John had done this before, and he was an elusive target. He'd lunged away from the door, flinging his runty body aside, and his old Peacemaker was bellowing. He felt the hot breath of Devil Dan's first bullet on his face.

Then he saw the big outlaw's gun sag, saw Devil Dan reel back against the counter, dazed surprise on his evil face. He stood there, swaying, trying to raise his gun, looking with dull eyes for Little John. But Little John's lunge had taken him behind a couple of barrels.

Then Devil Dan dropped his gun. He wilted down to the floor and lay there still.

The gunshots had roused Ute Gap. A dozen men crowded into the store, led by Mayor Sam Teak. They looked at Little John, at Devil Dan there on the floor.

"Beatin'est thing I ever see," Bide Dudley was saying. "Devil Dan already had his gun out—but Little John come bustin' right in like a wildcat. It took a lot of savvy, not to just stand there in the doorway and let Devil Dan shoot him apart. Little John spotted him the first shot, then drilled him center!"

Luke Abel, the town coroner, had come

in. Little John said curtly, "Luke will take care of the body. Wasn't you gents holdin' a sort of meetin'?"

The councilmen shuffled their feet and looked at each other. Mayor Teak cleared his throat, and said, "Well, yes we were—but seems like now—"

"Let's get on with it!"

Little John stalked from the store and along the street to the town hall, followed by the mayor and town council. He remained standing, while the town officials seated themselves about a long table. He slid a hand into his pocket.

Mayor Teak coughed, said, "Be seated, Marshal."

"I'll stand," Little John said grumpily. "And you don't need to beat about the bush with me. What was this meetin' called for?"

Mayor Teak got up, toying with a teakwood box on the table before him. He seemed embarrassed.

"I aimed to make a speech, Marshal," he said. "I had it all thought out—but seems like now ain't the time for speeches. You've just demonstrated, in action, all I wanted to say about you. We—dang it, Little John," he flung back the lid of the teakwood box, "this is why we called the meetin' tonight—to present you with these, as a slight token of what we think of you in Ute City!"

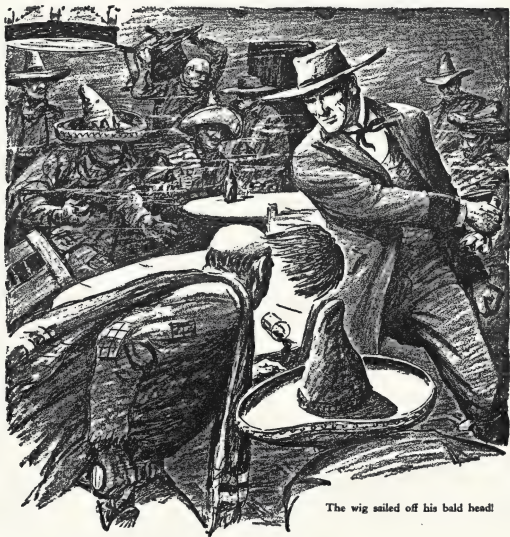
Dazedly, Little John stared down at the gunbelt and the twin shiny, silver-handled six-shooters in the box. His name was engraved on the handle of each gun. He picked up a card from the box, and read the few words scrawled on it:

From Ute City to Little John: In full appreciation of services rendered in past years—and for services to be rendered in years to come!

"We got a little tired waitin' for you to show up," the mayor was saying. "We didn't know you had your eye on Devil Dan. Should have known, though, that you were 'tendin' to business—as always!"

Little John's head was whirling, and he felt like the sun was shining inside him. Stealthily, he took the badge from his pocket and returned it to his vest front—hoping desperately that nobody had noticed it was missing.

Juan Poker—Courier of Death



The wig sailed off his bald head!

By **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

Juan Poker bitterly hated playing the fool—even though it brought his gun to bear on the Southwest's cleverest cut-throat!

ON A modest hillside in a small valley high above the arid splendor of the San Joaquin grew a kind of grapes from which a magic liquid came. Padre Ibanez called his wine *Sangre de Santo*, and the blood of a saint it was. A nectar a man long remembered. The vineyard was small and the padre old.

There was little of the wine in the press house in season and never any for sale. To

have tasted a cup of *Sangre de Santo* was to have been initiated into the small and strangely assorted circle of those who were Padre Ibanez' friends.

Long John Poker, wearied with endless riding across the San Joaquin, hacked the dust of travel from his throat and thought of the pleasure ahead. He had a summons from the aged father, a brief cartel which had been waiting for him at Monterrey:

Juan, my son:

We have been long absent from one another. I would see you—

It would be good indeed to sample again a priceless vintage and to enjoy the peace of an evening's talk with the old padre who had long since retired with his wisdom to the quiet of his vineyard. More than once when Juan Poker was bruised with violence and sick in spirit, the old father had patiently revived his faith in himself and his self-appointed task.

Now Poker was in need of reassurance again. Alta California, which had been a paradise when he first saw it, was fast becoming a sink hole of strife and corruption. From the gold fields at Coloma to the ranchos behind San Diego de Alcalá, the devil was astir. The *peon* and the *pobre*, the honest miner and the humble settler, called more often for the aid of the Yankee who brought his own brand of justice. It was a large need and Juan Poker was but one man.

John Poker had come to California, a brace of years before, as keenly thirsting for private fortune as any who had yet crossed the Sierra. Godless he still might be—though there were many of the devout who swore this was not so—but he had acquired a faith.

A belief that these lands between the mountains and the sea were neither the private preserves of the sleepy race which peopled them or the rightful booty of wolves crossing the Overland for plunder. A belief that out of two opposing peoples this land would blend a third worthy of it. And he fought for this belief—demanding justice for *californio* and encroaching *yanqui* alike.

Father Ibanez was also a man of this faith and Juan Poker had need of the aging father's counsel.

The press house and the small 'dobe

dwelling beside it were in a little hollow hidden from a traveller until he was almost upon it. When Poker dropped over the lip of the depression, he grunted in involuntary surprise. A number of horses were racked before the house. He lifted the pace of his mount. Something grave was in the air to make the father, who loved his solitude, invite so many at the same time! Poker pulled up among the horses and swung down, the corner of his eye catching the movement of a robed figure in the doorway. He turned, a greeting on his lips.

Poker offered a time-worn salutation in liquid Spanish. The reply came in Latin, as was the good father's custom:

"Pax Vobiscum, my son!"

But the voice did not belong to Father Ibanez. A full-faced man of large figure stood in the doorway. He was dressed in ecclesiastical robes of expensive cut and material. Robes like none Poker had seen in California. The man studied Long John intently.

"Father Ibanez—where—?" Poker asked uncertainly.

The strange padre frowned. He stepped back into the house and gestured for Poker to follow.

"Come—see for yourself!"

John Poker had a strong stomach, caloused so by necessity. But what he saw sickened him. The sparsely furnished, spotless room in which he had spent so many pleasant nights with a cup of wine and wisdom for company, was a shambles. Pits had been dug in the flail-packed 'dobe floor. Bricks had been pried here and there from the walls as if someone had been hunting for hidden recesses. Rubble and dirt and shattered furniture were scattered haphazardly throughout the room. Even the simple bed was broken up.

The body of the old father lay on a pallet of ticking in a corner. The strange padre drew back the ragged blanket covering the face so that Poker could see the hard way in which Father Ibanez had been made to die. Poker was stunned as though by a physical blow. He shook his head and fought blindly out into the clean sunlight again. The strange padre followed him.

"I am Felipe Amara, delegate from the Bishopric of Mexico. I came here on business for the church and found this work of the devil. Many devils, rather—men of

your race—who fled when my wagon appeared."

"Wagon?" Poker repeated. He had seen horses. There were half a dozen minor clerics in working robes about the house at chores of their own. But there was no wagon. Felipe Amara nodded.

"But yes," he said. "The work of the church must not wait, even on death. My comrade Ibanez was a clever vintner. The church had need of altar-wine. The wagon has been loaded from his press-house and sent on its way. I tarried but for last rites and to find a friend who might care for the remains of this poor property. I tarried unwillingly, my son. I have much work to do and must be on my way. You knew the father?"

Poker nodded wordlessly. Felipe Amara studied him again.

"Well, I take it," Amara went on. "Good! Perhaps you can perform a service for the church. You have heard of the Mission Fund?"

POKER nodded again. Whoever knew the work of the earnest, laboring men of the church in the Californias knew of the Mission Fund. It was a hoard of gold gathered in thin and trickling streams from the poor resources at the command of the mission padres—a distillation of their hopes and labors, their blood and their sweat. It had been gathered painfully, day-by-day over a long period of time in the hope that it would one day be large enough to found the biggest and finest church of their order in the new world.

Poker knew the Mission Fund. A friend of Father Ibanez could not help but know it. The old padre had founded it. And after his retirement he lived only for the day when the fund was big enough to begin its work.

Felipe Amara took a deep breath.

"The Fund has been kept at the vaults in San Gabriel Mission. Collections have been forwarded there. But twice of late brigands have attempted to take it. No longer safe in the big mission, it was sent a month ago in secret to Padre Ibanez in the belief thieves would not think to seek it of an old man in a peaceful vineyard."

John Poker's eyes narrowed. Evil wore many strange cloaks in this country—even those of holy men. This Felipe Amara was

a velvet liar, smooth and competent. The Fund, stored here! And thieves after it! This, then, explained the note Juan had found waiting in Monterrey. Padre Ibanez faced trouble and wished his good friend beside him—the good *yanqui* friend who had this time come too late!

"But the thieves were clever—" the churchman went on. "They came here. Father Ibanez made his poor defense and died. I have cause to believe, however, that my arrival drove off the spawn of Satan before they discovered the Fund. Your help is needed, *Senor*, in the name of the Mother Church. I have searched. My men have searched. But we do not know this house or the father's way of living. Time presses. I must be at Buenaventura without delay. I must not go without the Fund. Where would Father Ibanez hide that which he prized above life?"

Poker's mind ran smoothly. A man, like a good spring, fighting a force, must know when to give ground and when to lash back. Here, he knew, was the beginning of another of the trails of retribution by which he tracked down violators of the peace to which this land was heir. Not always did a dead man mark the beginning of such a trail. But Father Ibanez was more than a murdered friend and he richly deserved revenge. Not always did Juan, himself, track the lawless by assisting them. But a single rabbit might lead a clever hunter to a whole warren of his fellows.

Long John lead the way wordlessly to the press house. He but barely glanced at the racks stripped of their barrels of *Sangre de Santo*. Altar wine, Amara had said. But Amara's haste in loading the vintage on his wagon and sending it off smacked more of a drinking man's thirst than the efficiency of a man of faith in increasing the stores of his church!

Going to a corner, Poker kicked at a little pile of rubble on the otherwise clean floor and uncovered a ringbolt. Bending, he pulled on this and a neatly fitted square of stone came up. Amara's eyes widened. Careless of his fancy robes, the churchman dropped into the opening. His voice boomed hollowly below with a layman's oath of surprise and pleasure. He reappeared a moment later, his face reddened with strain, and lifted up a small casket.

He nodded at Poker, his eyes bright with

triumph, and disappeared again. One of his men lifted the casket lovingly and carried it outside. Amara came back with another casket and climbed out of the hiding place.

"You have done me a personal service, *Señor*," he told Poker with over-done courtesy. "Perhaps at another time I will repay it—"

Poker nodded.

"You might—" he agreed. "You might, at that! Now, what about Father Ibanez?"

A look of annoyance crossed the emissary's handsome face.

"Time still presses. I have already performed the necessary rites over the dead brother. You were his friend. It is not too much to leave his burial to you?"

Poker sensed that this was not a request. If the old padre was to be consigned to the earth, the job was his. This churchman had completed his business. It was in the way of a challenge. Poker shrugged it off with the appearance of agreeableness. Not that he wished particularly to avoid trouble, even with men of holy office, but his habit was to chose it at his own time and place.

Amara smiled at him, almost mockingly, summoned up his men, and mounted. Within half an hour of Poker's arrival, the church party was gone, riding down-valley on the trail of the wagon which carried the casks of *Sangre de Santo*. Poker found a spade, chose a place on a little knoll overlooking the slopes where his best grapes grew, and put Father Ibanez to rest.

As he worked at this unwelcome task, he wondered. If thieves had succeeded in stealing the Mission Fund, how would they profit by it? The easiest and safest way would be to change it into Yankee currency, of which there was now much in circulation about San Francisco. Yet even that would not be easy—

POKER was on the porch of the padre's little house, letting time run past him unheeded, when a ragged man came out of the brush above him and hurried afoot down the slope, moving with the long trotting stride of one who has covered much distance in a driven haste. The man was well past the middle of life, slack-bodied with inactive living, but with the strong face of one accustomed to importance.

"Father Ibanez—" he gasped as he

came up. Juan tilted his head wordlessly to the mound on the knoll.

"Too late!" the stranger croaked. "Two thousand miles and too late! But El Gato—perhaps you saw El Gato?"

"*El Gato*," Poker repeated the Spanish words curiously. "Father Ibanez had no cat!"

"Fool!" the other exploded. "Not cat! Devil, instead! A smooth-tongued devil, wearing my robes of office and riding with a wagon and some cutthroats!"

"There was a churchman," Juan said quietly, "a Felipe Amara—"

"I am Felipe Amara!" the stranger cried agonizingly. "Emissary of the Bishop of Mexico. I was trapped in the hills this side of San Gabriel and stripped of my robes and papers. My two servants were shot down, my horses taken. El Gato came on to finish my errand—collection of the Mission Fund! Dolt! You have been tricked. El Gato is a clever impostor, adept at changing his face and manner to the part he plays. And dangerous as a viper! But the arm of the holy is strong. Old as I may be, there is sinew for revenge. I am no man if I do not wear a ring from his bloody finger back to Mexico—with the Mission Fund across my saddle. Quick—which way did he go? And fetch a horse for a winded man!"

Father Ibanez' old mare was in the corral. The animal was small; Felipe Amara was large. They made a strange pair. But Amara would not hear of delay to find a better mount.

"El Gato is like a snake. He changes his skin. Already he has too much time. You, a thick-skulled *yanqui*, think we have but to overtake him on the road! But you do not understand this devil. He is a man of education—a hanger-on about Mexico City. A brigand, and clever. When the bishop elected to send me to the Californias after the Mission Fund, El Gato learned of it. And he travelled. No doubt he was within sight most of my own journey. Yet I, who know the man, did not recognize him. A shepherd on a hillside, perhaps. A loungee at an inn. Both could have been El Gato, watching me and laying his plans. When I learned at San Gabriel the gold was not there, he also learned it. A brilliant mind, without soul or scruples!"

"He's shepherding a wagonload of wine,"

Poker said dryly, making no strong attempt to change Amara's first estimate of his stupidity. "He might change his face, but I think I'd still know the wagon!"

"Wine!" Amara's eyes brightened. "Wine, you said? Ha! We yet stand a chance! It is El Gato's curse, the vice he loves—even to folly! If he should sample those casks along the way—but no—he is too smart to be found drunk, now! I hope in vain. We can only ride and ask of strangers along the wayside. But we must not lose the Fund!"

Poker nodded. They turned their mounts out of the now desolate vineyard. A strange pair. Poker had been saddlemate to many companions, but he doubted ever with the like of this churchman. Fat the man might be, softened by years of life within walls. But there was flint in him and an abiding impatience, both of which struck fire from every delay—from every hill and ford which slowed them.

For half a dozen miles they rode over clear sign of El Gato's cavalcade. Then the tracks began to split, to disintegrate. Directly they led into a glade beside the track and up to the deserted and empty wagon. A faint aroma was in the air, a matchless bouquet. Broken wine-casks lay on the grass about a wide red stain left when the earth swallowed Padre Ibanez' priceless vintage.

"*Todos los santos!*" Amara yelled in anguish. "Now we have not even a wagon to follow!"

Poker pointed to a reddened square of parchment paper lying among the shattered casks. Amara picked it up. He squawked again with outraged recognition.

"Sacilege! Insult! That dog and son of a dog—wine spilt on my commission in the Order of The Silver Star! *Guala!* The man is not only a thief but a despoiler!" the churchman moaned.

Poker spoke dryly.

"He put the commission to use. Look, it was rolled into a funnel. Some of the wine was put into saddle-bottles. He carries it with him. If a man has wine, he'll drink it. If he drinks, he'll want company."

Amara dropped the paper and stared admiringly at his companion.

"*Yanqui*, when you told me how you let this imposter take the Fund from its hiding place. I would as soon have had your blood

as that of El Gato! When you spoke of a trap with the Fund as bait to snare more than one thief, I thought you lied to save your face. But now it appears you are a philosopher. And a man of philosophy is no liar. We ride—on!"

"The taverns in this valley are rough places for a priest—" Poker suggested.

Amara leaned forward confidentially.

"I am not a priest, *Senor*," he said. "Say better, a soldier of the Church; a man given to long journeys, the protection of monies, and such other hardy tasks as the good bishop requires. Look you—in my robes I am a decorous man. Stripped of them, I am a devil, better fit to appear in a taproom than a cloister. You think El Gato will pause for carousal in a tavern tonight. I follow you. The man has done me evil service. And beyond this, I remember as a boy I received much help from a young padre who was later sent into this province. His name was Francisco Ibanez and his dead body weeps for revenge. We'll try your plan. There is no tavern in California more rough than my patience this day!"

Poker felt a kinship here. Too often he had heard it complained that the church bred soft men, grown fat and lazy and scheming in a service which should have made them strong. Here was living proof that this was not so. Amara, like Father Ibanez, was a man without fear.

THEY touched at three small taverns before nightfall, watching sharply for a company celebrating in private. But they found none. The host of the last inn followed them to the door when they found his place empty except for two *paisanos*.

"*Senores*, rest here," he begged. "You have heard that the Golden Pheasant, a league onward, is a better tavern than this. 'Tis so that the Pheasants' beds are soft and the cook renowned. True, also, that its taproom flows with many spirits. But it is a place of evil, now! There has been a shortage of labor and the *rancheros*, whose lands the Pheasant neighbors, have brought men in from the south to shear their sheep. Many men with monies in their pockets. Each night their carousals stun the heavens! You are gentlemen. Avoid this. Sleep in peace if not in comfort under my roof. I beg it!"

Poker looked at Felipe Amara. The

churchman grinned eagerly. This Pheasant had a good sound. El Gato might feel safe in losing a day in the turmoil of such surroundings. With the churchman beside him, Poker pushed past the host of the small inn and remounted. . . .

The Golden Pheasant was new and large—built to accommodate the greater trade and influx of miners and speculators crowding the *Camino Real*. Its lights were visible a long time in the darkness. Poker and his companion rode into its arch in silence. A hostler came. Poker tossed the man a coin and relinquished the reins of the weary horses. The man trotted away, leading the animals. Amara looked uneasily about him.

"If El Gato is in truth in this place of iniquity, he will know us at once," he suggested. "He has killed a handful of men already to secure the Fund. What is to prevent him from seeing us dead to hold it?"

Poker's arm moved smoothly. His hand came up with a dully gleaming side-gun. He spun the cylinder as though checking loads. His smile was flat, hard, and sure.

"This!" he said quietly, re-sheathing the gun. "If El Gato is here, there will be another, also—a Californian come to do business. You stay close to the door when we go in. If there is trouble, get outside and raise as big a commotion as you can. If the Fund is here—and El Gato—we'll get both. And maybe the trader come to do business with him!"

Felipe Amara shook his head.

"I am not a man to doubt either his God or a friend. But you do not know how dangerous is this El Gato!"

"It's time I did!" Poker answered harshly. And he batted the door of the Golden Pheasant open.

The host at their previous stop had not exaggerated. The Pheasant was full of sheep-shearers and their unsavory odor. A swift glance brought Poker sharp disappointment. He had doubted that El Gato—as Amara had insisted—could disguise himself. But there was no familiar face. Poker had counted strongly on this place. It seemed a likely haunt for a man who carried his own supply of bottled celebrant and had cause to drink it.

Suddenly his eyes fastened on a man apart from the shearers—a man he knew. Amos Crail—a notorious shipping-agent

from San Francisco. What business could Crail have in this inland valley? The answer was there, if it fitted. Crail was the kind of man to whom a thief might turn to exchange stolen gold for less easily identified currency.

Poker saw that Crail had marked his entrance, was watching him narrowly. Their glances met. Crail turned away, but Juan knew he still watched. Poker shoved on into the room toward the bar. The crowd gave him room grudgingly. He could not tell whether the friendless stares were only resentment at the intrusion of a stranger into their nightly carousal—or something more dangerous.

Almost to the bar his glance fell on two tables whose occupants had bottles sitting before them—bottles without a vintner's seal on their necks. One of these, a disreputable looking old fellow was about the right build. Poker staked a flashing hunch. He glanced at Crail, saw the man had not moved, and veered toward the near table. It was sudden. He was able to lift one of the unsealed bottles before the occupants of the table could protest. He stepped back, holding the bottle up. And he grinned wickedly down at the old shearer sitting at the table.

"I'm looking for a gent who killed a friend of mine for two little chests of gold and a few casks of wine. One man's gold is like another's. It is hard to claim, once it's gone. Wine is different. Perhaps you know wine, *viejo*. Perhaps you know that if this bottle came from the Ibanez vineyard its taste will tell me so!"

Poker's Spanish was smooth—and ugly. The ruffian at the table stared up unblinkingly.

"Some wine is poison!" he said softly. "This is my table!"

JUAN felt his muscles tighten. But not even this was proof—not yet. A man might resent a bottle being snatched from in front of him and still not be a killer masquerading. Poker glanced swiftly toward the door. Felipe Amara was just inside and to the left of the opening, standing behind a heavy chair. Amos Crail was still in his seat, his attention wide as though the scene at the table was of but casual interest to him. Poker tilted the bottle.

Three things happened simultaneously.

A drop of wine touched his lips with a familiar aroma—*Sange de Santo!* The ruffian at the table started snarlingly up out of his seat. And a gun smashed abruptly. The bullet driven by the shot passed close to Poker's head and shattered the bottle in his hand. The man at the table clawed his filthy tunic back to expose a gun in his waistband. And Amos Crail was shouting: "That's Poker—Juan Poker, you fool! Kill him; don't bait him!"

Poker realized it was Crail who had fired at him. He had a split-second glimpse of Felipe Amara heaving the heavy chair behind which he had been standing out over the heads of other men shoving up from their tables. But his eyes were rooted on the man in front of him.

Swinging close to avoid a possible second shot by Crail, Long John smashed at the ruffian with the hand which still held the neck of the shattered wine bottle. The shearer was quick on his feet—too quick for a man of his apparent age. He ducked smoothly. The jagged glass passed over his head, barely grazing his scalp. But it caught the hair there and lifted it free—a wig!

Long John crossed with his other hand, trying to jolt the fellow hard enough to stop his draw. His fist puffed flesh, thudded against underlying bone, and skidded free. The track of the blow was plain on the face. Grime and grease were stripped to show an unlined skin of much lighter shade.

It was enough. This ragged laborer, under the bizarre gear in which he had clothed himself to escape detection, was the devil who had posed as an emissary of the church at the vineyard. This was El Gato!

The brigand was driven back a pace by Juan's blow. The brief break gave Juan a chance to free his own iron. But other guns were swinging up. Amara had vanished—out the door, Poker hoped. He was alone against odds he could not count. He had but one defense. His gun tipped and fired twice at the hanging lamps. Blackness cascaded over the interior of the Golden Pheasant. Blackness and cursing and the crash of gunfire at unseen targets.

Juan went flat on the floor and rolled under a table. He fired at muzzle-flame. A man yelped. Another fell heavily across furniture and Poker rolled again. Outside a great din was building up. And it came from one throat. Amara, with a voice like

the trumpets of doom, was loudly bleating: "Help—for the Mother Church and a yanqui!"

The howling changed in a moment, its note deepening.

"Soldiers! This way—swiftly! Murder! Murder!"

There was the din of dismounting men and further shouts.

Astonished and at the same time knowing there could be no soldiery about, Poker got his feet under him and scuttled for the back door. Two figures were ahead of him at the portal. He crashed into one and struck him down savagely with the barrel of his gun. The man dropped a heavy burden which shook the floor. Poker bent for this, then drew back, sensing the second man was doing likewise.

The second man grunted as though lifting a heavy burden and Poker heard his nails rasping along the planking in search of the latch. The scratching stopped. The door flung suddenly open and a shaft of moonlight penetrated the thick interior of the Golden Pheasant.

Almost at Poker's feet was the body of a man dressed in the gear of a shearer of sheep. He lay face down and the back of his head was caved by the stroke of Juan Poker's gun-barrel. It was the brigand, El Gato. Poker stepped over the body. Another man, struggling with two small caskets, one under either arm, shot through the doorway into the night beyond. Poker leaped after him, jerked the door closed at his back, and raised his gun carefully.

The piece fired surely. It was a nice, clean shot. The running man came up on his toes, clung doggedly to his twin burdens for a moment, then buckled at the knees and pitched forward. Poker reached him in a pair of strides, rolled him over. Amos Crail had attended many rendezvous with the lawless and had come away rich. This time his profit was death. Poker bent above the caskets, making certain that they were the pair which had come from the secret room under the press house at the Ibanez vineyard.

From the front of the inn came further stentorian pleas for help from Felipe Amara, together with brittle military orders running out from a commandant to subalterns. Poker went forward with fresh puzzlement at the soldiery. But he had a chore.

He dropped on his knees beside Crail's body and opened the man's coat. A wallet rested in a pocket there. Poker opened it. It contained a thick packet of Yankee bills—totalling perhaps only half of the worth of the gold in the caskets brought here by Crail, Juan knew, to buy the Mission Fund from the man who had stolen it.

To Amara, El Gato's death would mean victory. It was this Crail's death which brought satisfaction to Poker. Such men as this, frequenting the fringe of the law and doing service for the lawless were more dangerous than a jail full of thieves. California had lost an enemy and had a better chance for peace.

Where there could be humor in justice, however wry, Juan Poker was doubly pleased. He opened one of the caskets, thrust Crail's packet of bills in on top of the minted metal, and closed the lid again.

"For Francisco Ibanez!" he muttered softly.

A moment later, with the caskets under his arms, he doubled around the front of the Golden Pheasant. Amara's tumult and his soldiery had outlived their worth. The noise—the commands and shouting and military din—had come from Amara—Amara and the hostler and two boys the churchman had pressed into service with who knows what threats. El Gato's shaken men, trapped, had ventured a sortie against the front and discovered the ruse. They

were pouring frantically out, now, firing only to cover their own retreat.

Poker roared at Amara, caught his attention, and drew the man on the run. A rack of horses was at hand. Poker saw Amara up in a saddle which fitted him and dropped the caskets into good saddle-bags strapped behind.

"*Vayo con Dios, Señor!*" he said softly. "Ride!"

"*Todos los Santos!*" Amara breathed wonderingly. "The Fund! What manner of *yanqui* is this? And I thought my shouting a brave stroke! El Gato is—?"

"Dead. Ride, friend!"

Amara leaned insistently from his saddle.

"But comrade—*amigo*—*Señor!* When I tell the bishop of this he will want the name of the *yanqui* who serves the mother church as his own!"

"Ride!" Poker growled impatiently. A man's name was of no account. There had been work to do. It was now finished. And there were other errands—

"But the name—"

Poker turned on his heel, took a pair of running steps, and hit the saddle of another horse. Amara shouted again. As Poker reined swiftly away, the hostler growled knowingly at the bishop's emissary.

"Would you shout at a ghost, Big-Mouth? Juan Poker is a man who has no time for talk. If he did you well, thank your God, and as he said—ride, *Señor!*"



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*Stirring
Rangeland
Novelette*



Beaten at every turn, Tonto Bill grimly decided to have lots of company at his downfall. And he collected guests—alive and dead!



CHAPTER ONE

Two Dehorned Gunnies

T ONTO BILL HARPER wasn't exactly what any hombre would have called downright miserable, but he was a considerable ways short of being happy. What with four straight years of drought, herd-bulls dying off, no calf-crop the past two seasons, the cow business shot plumb to pieces—at least for a small-spread

OF TONTO BILL



Tonto jerked De Spain
out of the kak.

hombre like himself. Well, there hadn't been a more hopeless person in the whole of Arizona.

Then had come that cavalry remount contract—two hundred fifty selected young

brons, broken to saddle and carbine-fire. Hadn't been for that, Tonto Bill Harper would probably right then be riding the ranges and hitting up the chuck-line—just another saddle-tramp.

But in just three months— Shucks, it didn't seem possible! Two hundred fifty broncs, the pick of the wild ones, at one-hundred smackers per. Twenty-five thousand berries! True enough, the broncs had cost plenty time and trouble catching them up, plus one year's care, and adding the expense of two tophand twisters to the total, all would add up to a right considerable amount.

And Tonto had trouble on his mind. He had to have grain and baled hay. Lots of it. Those remounts must be turned over in prime shape. Yeah—but Tonto had no grain, no hay, and precious little money. As for credit, there just wasn't any credit a-tall.

"Can't figger no way around it," Tonto assured himself dolefully, as he hooked his elbows over the top-rail of the corral in which dozed half-a-dozen mounts of his personal remuda. "Ain't no way but to get a bank-loan on them remounts—onless I crave to have 'em turn out just so many skins fulla bones. . . ."

"Hi there, Tonto—yuh got company!"

Tonto knew the voice. It was his neighbor on the east, Jack DeSpain, hailing. DeSpain, who, two years ago, had tried to buy Tonto's Bar 2 spread—to add to his own much larger spread which adjoined—and at a quarter of the price it would have brought before the drought set in. DeSpain, who, a month ago, had tried to buy Tonto's remounts—at thirty dollars a head.

DeSpain knew what Tonto would soon be up against in the matter of feed, and had bid accordingly. Therefore, Tonto Bill Harper liked Jack DeSpain not even a little bit. He turned leisurely and walked toward the front of his two-room log ranch-house.

"Get down, DeSpain, and rest yore saddle," he invited. "Them two twisters of mine'll be in pretty soon, and we'll heat up the beans, put on the coffee-pot—"

"I didn't come to eat warmed over beans, nor to drink stale java," DeSpain cut in disagreeably. "I rode over to ask yuh a question. It's this: Are yuh going to take thirty bucks a head for them remount broncs, cash on the nail, or let 'em starve to death?"

Tonto felt a quick tension up and down his six-foot-two-inches of bone and muscle, and the anger within him was at least red

as his hair—which was nothing if not fiery in color. But he checked himself, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"Neither," he answered briefly. "Got some more questions yuh crave to ask?"

"Nope. Yuh just answered the only one I brought along with me." Then, with a wide, malicious grin: "A month from now, Harper, yuh probably will sing a diffrent tune—and I doubt if broncs, even them remounts of yours, will be worth half what I'd give for 'em today. Yeah, when them ponies of yores set in nickering, pawing and begging for feed yuh ain't got and can't get—"

Tonto's long legs carried him to the head of DeSpain's horse in two strides. He seized a bit-ring, holding the bronc in his tracks, and, his rugged, homely face white with anger, blazed:

"Yuh are a skunk right from Skunkville, DeSpain! I been thinking that yuh was for a long time. Now yuh done proved it right to the hilt. So get off this spread, and don't come back. I ain't got no time to waste palaverin' with scrub stock such as yuh." He released the bit-ring, stepped aside and added: "Now lemme see yuh foggin' away frum here—and pronto!"

DeSpain, face contorted with rage, dropped a hand to the butt on his low-slung forty-five—then saw that Tonto had beat him to it. He let his hand drop away, wheeled his bronc, looked over a shoulder and shouted:

"Yuh'll remember paying high for this, damn yuh! Mark my words!"

"Git!"

DeSpain went away in a fog of dust, leaving Tonto troubled deeply, hurting with restrained desire for action—and a heap disgusted. Mostly, he was disgusted. If that Jack DeSpain was a good citizen, then Tonto was damned glad he didn't rate as one!

THE lack of feed to carry the broncs for the ensuing three months was, of course, a major trouble. All other troubles were dwarfed by comparison. There was just one chance for Tonto to get the feed-money so badly needed. Jack DeSpain owned the general store at Lodgepole, likewise the livery-stable, principal saloon and only hotel, but he didn't own the bank or any part of it. Old Man Ritchie controlled the

bank, and Ritchie was a square shooter. "I'll get me a loan," he decided. "That'll knock the socks off my main trouble—"

More trouble came riding Tonto's way just then. Shorty Furgeson and Slat Blake, his two bronc-twisters, stopped at the corral gate, stripped their sweaty mounts and turned them inside. Tonto thought nothing of that, it being a regular procedure. But when both men entered the corral and roped out their personal mounts and saddled up—

"Yuh fellers aiming to ride somewheres tonight?" he queried when the pair moved on to the cabin.

"Yeah, Tonto," Slat told him shortly. "We're both of us ridin' fur keeps. Yuh got enough jack to pay us off—or do we rope out half-dozen of them broncs and take our wages outten them?"

Tonto stood for a moment in silence. He was astonished, and no mistake. Blake and Furgeson were tophands, and he'd surely need tophands during the coming three months. He was behind only two months with their pay, and they'd agreed to that. Now they were rearing up. Howcome that?

"Yuh fellers know yuh'll get yore pay—" he began.

"Yeah—and right on the barrel-head," Shorty cut in. "Else we annexes half-a-dozen them babies of your'n, then pays ourselves!"

Tonto relaxed his long frame abruptly. He shrugged—and let his hands drop toward the butts of his holstered sixguns. Plenty men in the Southwest would have warned that such was Tonto Bill Harper's fighting stance, had they been there to do it. Tonto's gray eyes were slitted narrowly and his mouth was a straight, thin line. Presently he spoke.

"Before yuh put a paw on even one of them broncs," he advised quietly, "yuh gotta prove how good yuh are with them smoke-wagons yuh are luggin' around.

Yuh crave to argue it out on them lines—now?"

Shorty Furgeson shifted from foot to foot uneasily, and kept his gun-hand well to the front. Blake's eyes were cold and his manner unruffled.

"Gun-talk won't settle nothin'," he pointed out. "Give us our jack, Harper, and there ain't going to be no trouble."

"Trouble!" Tonto sneered derisively. "Wish I didn't have no more trouble than the pair of yuh could make for me. Now—listen, I aim to ride to Lodgepole day after tomorrer and raise jack enough to pay yuh fellers and see me through—"

"We ain't waitin' ontel then!" Slat Blake snapped. "We aim to ride pronto. So how about our jack?"

"Anyhow," Shorty contributed, "we understand that yore partner in Phoenix, Sam Teale, that's been furnishin' yuh with the jack to run on, done got them broncs plumb covered up with a mo-gidge. How 'bout that?"

"There's a whoppin' liar been running loose in these parts lately," Tonto surmised. "And I figger Jack DeSpain to be that liar. Sam Teale will be in Lodgepole day after tomorrer," he went on, "to sign with me at the bank and get us a loan. But yuh fellers done put yore cards down. Reckon I can manage to pay off a pair of double-crossin' ki-utes right now. Glad to do it and be rid of yuh."

Tonto's hands dropped away from his guns. With his right he reached for a wallet on his hip—

That was what Slat Blake was waiting for. He streaked for his sixgun, slapped palm to butt—and snatched it away again.

Tonto's left-hand gun was out in a blazing flash, and a bullet plowed into the heavy holster on Blake's hip. There was a sound of lead smacking steel, and Blake staggered back, tossing his hands high.

"Deal me out!" he yelled.

Tonto swiveled around with cat-like co-

Every War Bond You Buy

is a Nail in

Tojo's Coffin!

ordination—and another slug from his gun sent Furgeson's drawn weapon out of his grip just as though the waddie had thrown it away.

"Two of yuh dehorned now," Tonto commented icily. "Unbuckle yore belt, Blake, and drop yore artillery—and make it sudden!"

Blake obeyed immediately and carefully. Then he stepped away from what was probably a wrecked and useless gun. He gulped twice and asked:

"Whut—whut yuh aim to do about this here?"

Tonto made no answer just then. He had a worn and tattered wallet out and was thumbing through the contents. Finally he nodded and said:

"One-twenty owed each one of yuh two months work. Two-forty all told. Take this here tally-book," he continued, taking one from a pocket in his shirt, "and scribble me out yore receipts fur pay in full. Then git the hell away frum here—and stay got."

Five minutes later, two disgruntled and completely "dehorned" bronc-busters were fogging it away toward Lodgepole.

CHAPTER TWO

Cut Wires!

Tonto lay in his bunk that night, sleepless, taut as new-stretched barbed-wire. He had a strong hunch that more trouble was headed his way. Another major trouble. Probably worse than what he already had. He had not the faintest idea what it would be or from what source it would come. But he was certain that it would show up before long.

That DeSpain had hired his twisters away from him was a foregone conclusion. And Tonto felt sure that his men had been bought off in furtherance of some scheme which did not show on the surface. Not having the help he needed would cripple Tonto some, but it wouldn't be fatal—unless, of course, he failed to get new men on the job soon.

Well, with the loan from the bank, he could hire himself another pair of horse-hands. A helluva lot depended on that loan. Mainly, it would save those broncs from going about with lean bellies and thin flanks. Yeah, mainly that.

"—When them pines of yores set in nickerin, pawin and beggin for feed yuh ain't got and can't get—"

Tonto was suddenly seeing red. He got up. No use trying to sleep. He glanced at the tin clock on a shelf. Ten. A pot of coffee, right on top of a double shot of rye, failed to pacify him. In all his twenty-five years of life, Tonto had never been as low in mind as he was right then. Never.

"Reckon I'll hit the breeze fur an hour or so," he finally decided. "Mebbe git myself some sleep then."

He forked a bronc and rode out along the north line of the big fenced pasture into which his broncs were thrown each evening. To tell the truth, Tonto Bill Harper was in love. He'd been in love a few times in the past. Sort of experimentally, likewise transitorily.

But his present love wore a different brand from all those others. He was in love with two hundred fifty hand-picked, gentled and well care for broncs, being even more jealous of their safety and comfort than, he told himself, he could have ever been about a woman. Yeah. Just any woman a-tall.

So he rode along his east line, knowing he'd find his pets bunched up somewhere in the pasture. Sleeping. Depending on him for food and care—

At the northeast corner of the pasture he reined up abruptly, head forward, listening intently. When a shod hoof strikes against rock there's no mistaking the sound, and that was what Tonto had heard. Silence after that. Still he sat motionless in his saddle and waited.

Then came another sound. A different but no less identifiable sound.

The sound of pliers contacting barbed-wire!

Tonto waited no longer. Rounding the corner of the pasture, he dug his gigs in and went racing down the east line—the butt of a sixgun gripped tight in an eager hand. This was a killing business. Horse thieves, huh? Well, it had been quite a spell since Tonto had rubbed out a horse-thief—but he hadn't forgotten how!

Suddenly he was conscious of a dark, moving mass coming swiftly from farther up in the pasture and headed, seemingly, for the east line-fence. There was the rumbling thunder of many hoofs. Some-

body was hazing his broncs along hell-for-leather—straight for that east fence!

Somebody meant to stampede and scatter his horse-herd to hell and gone everywhere! Somebody who know he hadn't any punchers to side him. Scatter them and pick them up at leisure, huh? Was that the play?

Sure. DeSpain's chips were down at last—and Shorty and Slats, and Lord only how many more, were sitting in the game with him!

Tonto no longer saw red. He was, in fact, quite cool. He was always like that in action—and certain it was that swift and deadly action lay right ahead.

W-h-h-i-i-n-n-n-g-g-g!

A snapped wire sang a high, whining song—and then Tonto saw him. The stooped man with the pliers. He was in the act of cutting the ground wire. Tonto rode hellbent straight for him. The wire-cutter straightened suddenly, looked around quickly, then in panic leaped for the brush twenty feet away. He did not reach cover.

Tonto's bronc struck him breast high, and he went down under flashing hoofs, the startled cry of fright, just begun, choking off—just a gurgle in his throat.

Tonto wheeled and rode back. Running his glance southward along the fence, he estimated the damage done. The barbed-wire was down as far as he could see in the light of a dim moon.

And those broncs were being choused down towards where the gaps had been cut!

HE SPURRED hard, leaped the down wire, rode rapidly towards the oncoming broncs—firing in the air and yelling at the top of his lungs as he went. The pace of the massed broncs slackened, almost stopped—then the leaders whirled affrightedly and raced at left-angles toward the safe and secure north line.

When the drag of the horse-herd had flashed past him, Tonto peered out across the pasture which lay only vaguely revealed under the moon. He saw movement, then came an angry shout.

"Hey, Shorty—whut the hell! That yuh doing all that blatin'?"

A short wait. Then: "Damn yore hide, Shorty—"

The rider then saw Tonto. Saw him vaguely. Probably he mistook him for

Shorty Furgeson, for he spurred towards him, snarling in a high-pitched voice:

"Whut sorta foolishment yuh up to—?"

"Hold it, Blake! Go high—or fill yore hand!"

"Hellsfire!" Slats Blake ejaculated dragging his bronc onto its haunches. "It ain't Shorty!"

Off to Tonto's left, a matter of fifty yards, a rifle snarled viciously. Lead sang just above his head. Tonto flattened out over his mount's withers—and rode straight toward Blake. Blake's gun roared, and a fiery pain shot through the flesh of Tonto's left arm.

Then his own gun blasted. One shot. Blake was going down—was down, and his bronc was off to one side, snorting in fright.

Again that snarling rifle came into play. Expecting that, Tonto had leaped his bronc ahead—and just in time. He wheeled on a dime, rode a swift course towards where he had seen the spurt of flame from the rifle's muzzle. A cloud masked the moon briefly, throwing the pasture into pitch-like darkness. It cleared as abruptly as it had come—and Tonto found himself almost against the rifleman, who had dismounted, rifle even then smacking its butt against his shoulder.

Tonto's gun flamed, roared, jumped in his fist—and the rifleman buckled at the knees, swayed helplessly from side to side, and went down on his face.

Tonto ejected the empty cartridges from his gun, thumbing in fresh ones, then rode back to where Slats lay on the ground. No need to bother looking at the rifleman. He was dead when he hit the grass. Tonto knew that. But it might be different with Blake, and Tonto was unwilling to leave even an enemy helpless and down.

Blake was alive, right enough—but his right shoulder was badly blasted. He groaned in pain, rocking back and forth. Tonto, watchful for a trick, stepped down and went to him.

"Yuh got about half whut yuh had coming to yuh," he commented, untying Blake's neck-handkerchief and binding it around the wound. "As it looks now, yuh'll live to hang. Or mebbe yuh ain't knowin' that Arizona folks hangs cow-thieves and hoss-thieves without any trial a-tall—"

"Yuh ain't got nothin' on me!" Blake

bleated. "Shorty and me allowed we'd come back to work fur yuh. We didn't find yuh at home, but we did hear a commotion in the pasture. So we come out to help—"

"And," sarcastically, "Shorty brought along a pair of pliers to do his helping with. No use, Blake. I've got yuh dead to rights, and yuh know it. Now—upon yore hind laigs, polecat. I'll toss yuh onto yore kak. Then we're going to see Shorty. That shore enough helpful hombre ain't feeling none too helpful right now, I'd tell a man!"

They found Shorty—pliers with him. He was badly bunged up, and had one arm dangling helplessly at his side. He sat on the ground, swearing savagely when they rode up. Tonto dismounted and prodded him to his feet, forced him to bring his bronc out of the brush and mount.

"Head fur the home-grounds," he ordered. "And try a getaway if yuh feel that hopeful. I ain't ever shot a man in the back—but I'd pop it to a pair of polecats just any old how."

As he had expected, Tonto found his broncs bunched up in the northwest corner of the pasture near the cabin. They'd be safe enough for a while. Meantime, he had to get his captives safely out of hand.

Back of the cabin there was a root-cellar. It was a shallow, square hole in the ground, without windows and with its only exit guarded by a heavy plank door. Tonto ordered Blake and Shorty down, prodded them into the cellar and, in spite of their yells and protests, locked them in.

Twenty minutes later he was back with the body of the rifleman. A rannie he had never laid eyes on before. A drifter, probably, who craved jack and didn't care how he got it. DeSpain's jack, of course.

Opening the door, Tonto tumbled the dead man down into the black hole. "Here's yore side-kick to keep you company!" he called out. "His luck was in, fellers. He won't halfta hang."

Shorty yelled, "He done kilt Bigmouth Bennett—kilt him deader'n hell!"

"Harper," Blake pleaded, "take me outta here! I'm bleedin' plumb to death—"

"Want me to git word to yore folks to come git yore carcass?" Tonto enquired solicitously. "Or does skunks have folks?"

He slammed the door, locked it and rode off to where the broncs were bunched. He rode slowly, talking to them as he was in

the habit of doing. After half an hour of coaxing, he had all of them safely in a small upper pasture. Safe for the time at least.

Tonto, tough as a strip of rawhide though he was, had begun to tire. He corraled his mount, went into his cabin and made a light. A good feed of bacon and beans, washed down by huge cups of black coffee, soon took the edge off his weariness. Come to think of it, he had a heap of things to attend to that day.

He had to get the sheriff out, also the coroner. A doctor, too. Tom Harris, the sheriff, could be counted on to cut the deck square. One of the few a fella could speak that well of. DeSpain didn't own him, or any part of him.

Also, Tonto had to find out if Sam Teale had sent an answer to the letter he had written a week before. A letter requesting him to show up in Lodgepole the following Thursday to sign up for that loan at the bank.

That loan was more important now than ever. The fat would be in the fire and burned to a crisp without it. Sam knew that, so he would naturally be on hand as requested. Good guy, Sam. One of the best. Salt of the earth, in fact.

Day had come and Tonto was about to set out to look his prisoners over, when a bronc in the corral gave out a long whicker of welcome—and that took Tonto to the door in two long strides. What he saw amazed him, but he opened the door wider and stepped out. He had doubted his eyes for a moment, but now he knew it was true.

A girl—a very pretty girl—was short-roping a bronc straight towards him!

CHAPTER THREE

"Riders Comin'!"

JUST when it looked as if the pretty girl was going to ride Tonto down, she dragged her mount down. She gave Tonto a dazzling smile and a friendly nod.

"Light down, ma'am, and rest yore saddle," Tonto began hospitably. Then, eyeing a small, black case thonged to the horn of her saddle, he added: "No need to, though, if yuh are peddling something. I'm plumb busted."

The girl looked a bit surprised as she

stepped down and hitched to the ground. A lovely blonde girl, dressed in fawn colored riding-britches, handsomely stitched range-boots, flannel shirt with a rolled collar, doeskin jacket, and a cream-colored Stetson which tried to but couldn't conceal the alluring curl in her corn-silk hair.

"I'm not peddling anything," she assured Tonto promptly. "Not even giving away samples. And I'm not at all interested in the state of your finances—unless you happen to be somebody I'm looking for. Are you?"

Tonto felt all at sea, but he answered. "I wouldn't know if I am or not, ma'am. What sorta somebody—"

"A man. I'm looking for a man. His name is Tonto Harper. Tonto after a mountain, river or something like that. Do you know him?"

Tonto was now not only adrift at sea but he was beginning to feel somewhat disturbed. "I am him," he told her. "I mean, I'm this here Tonto Harper. Called Tonto, ma'am, because I used to live a heap up in Tonto Basin."

The young woman flashed Tonto a friendly smile, advanced and offered him a small, neatly gloved hand. Tonto took it diffidently.

"Sam sent me," she informed him. "I'm Sam's sister."

"Yuh—yuh are which?" Tonto asked in a daze.

"Sister," she repeated slowly. "I'm Sam's sister."

"I getcha!" Tonto beamed. "Yuh mean Sam is yore brother!"

"Sure," she laughed approvingly. "You are certainly a quick-on-the-trigger hombre. Tonto—you—you old wart-hog. Sam said for me to speak your own language to you. And," noting Tonto's half-frown, "did I say something awful?"

Tonto took time out and advantage of her pretty confusion to size her up more fully. He was an excellent judge of horse-flesh as well as beef-on-the-hoof, but inexperienced in the matter of lovely blondes. However, he approved of what he saw of this one. A trifle gant, perhaps, but rangily built. He liked her general conformation, especially the length of her stride. Good ankle-and-knee action, too, he had already observed. About twenty years old, and a purebred, he summed up.

"Not if yuh don't aim it to be," he allowed gallantly in answer to her query. "What I wanta know, ma'am, is where is this same Sam?"

"Oh," the girl exclaimed, "I was forgetting to tell you about it! Sam got a leg broken. Playing polo with the Phoenix Bears against the Tucson Peaches. I'm one of the Peaches, you know. Sam's pony fell—"

"My good gosh!" Tonto cried sympathetically. "Sam busted a laig, and sent yuh to tell me about it—"

"No!" the girl interrupted. "He sent me with his—I think you call it a power of attorney. I'm here to sign with you and get some money from a bank. And Sam said for the love of heaven send him five hundred. His leg isn't all that's broke about him."

That brought Tonto back to the present with something of a yank. The present, and the immediate problems confronting him. Too, he was curious about Sam's little sister.

"Howcome yuh to be riding so bright and early, ma'am, if yuh don't mind saying?" he queried.

The girl didn't mind. She puckered up her face, probably to indicate distaste and disgust, and said:

"I got to Lodgepole at midnight. The man at the depot directed me to your place, or did his best no doubt. Suggested that I stop at the hotel until daylight, but my business wasn't the kind that could wait. Sam's in an awful sweat right at this moment, you know. So I hired this hammer-headed plug at the livery-stable and shoved off. Got off the trail a few times, and couldn't get the plug out of a slow jog-trot most of the time. I don't wear spurs, and he pays no attention at all to bare heels. Came daylight. Got my bearings—and here I am."

TONTO nodded slowly. Here she was, true enough. And with her hand out. For Sam, of course. That meant a loan of two thousand instead of the fifteen hundred he had planned for. Okay. Sam needed it and he'd get it.

"Reckon yuh could stand to rest up a while, and put away some grub," he opined. "Step right inside, ma'am, whilst I put up yore bronc—"

"Prop him up would be better," she offered sourly. "Looks like he might fall down any minute."

Tonto grinned. "Yuh evidently don't savvy these here simon-pure bronc hosses," he told her. "This here one is a notorious loafer and staller. He's fresher right now than yuh are, ma'am."

"Give me a decent saddle," she remarked boastfully, making a face at the stock kak which she had forked "and a high-stepping polo-pony under me—and I'll ride rings around anything this gosh-awful desert waste can produce. Want to bet?"

Tonto shook his head sadly. "Ma'am," plaintively, "I've got just exactly three silver dollars betwixt me and th' chuck-line. Please don't banter me into betting them."

"You're comparatively rich, Tonto," Miss Teale applauded with a cheering smile. "I've just a lone four-bit piece between me and a job slinging hash—if it should turn out that I can sling hash. And that reminds me," she finished, "that I'm hungry as a wolf."

"Gosh!" Tonto muttered as he led the hammer-head to the corral. "She's hongry like a wolf—and flapjacks and blackstrap ain't exactly provender for no wolf!"

But he did the best he could. Miss Teale put away the flapjacks and blackstrap with gusto. She even downed two cups of coffee—strong as sheep-dip and black as the heart of Satan—without even blinking her unbelievably blue eyes. Then she sighed contentedly as she smoked a brown-paper cigarette which Tonto rolled for her.

While she smoked, Tonto told her about the happenings of the night before, or as much as he thought she needed to know. The girl's cigarette, neglected during the swift narration, grew cold. Anxiety dark-brushed the roses from her cheeks. In short, Sam Teale's sister was more than a little frightened.

"They—they tried to run off the bronses, and to kill you!" she gasped finally. "It's hard to believe that there are such awful people in the world! Honestly it is!"

"Ma'am," Tonto advised her, "there does happen to be a scatterin' of such folks here and there. Usually they git what's due 'em in the end. I know a few hereabouts that's plumb asking fur it—and I aim to see that they gits it. But here's

what I figger yuh and me has got to do. I'll load them shot up jaspers into my buckboard, and th' corp along with 'em, and deliver the whole caboodle to Sheriff Harris in person. Yuh can fork one bronc and lead another fur me. That jibe with you?"

"Of course, Tonto," she agreed.

"Thank yuh, ma'am. It's important we gits that bank business fixed up today. Them bronses has been gitting along on mesquite beans and a little baled hay fur quite a spell. Ain't no browse no longer. Plumb burnt out. The ranges, I mean. Well, I'll hook up a team to th' buckboard, saddle them bronses, and we'll fog away from here—in case yuh feel rested enough, ma'am?"

"I'm rested plenty," she reassured. "But—can't you call me something else than ma'am?"

"Miss Teale?"

"Pooh! That's still worse!"

Tonto got a notion just then which split his face in a wide grin. "Peaches, mebbe?" he chuckled. "Yuh allowed yuh was one of them Peaches—"

The girl laughed merrily.

"Okay, Peaches," he said, starting for the door. "I'll go and hook up—"

He broke off, stood on the doorsill and looked away down the trail from the main road. A moment, and he turned to the girl.

"Half a dozen fellers ridin' this way," he told her, his face a bit grim. "Yuh better stay inside, Peaches, unless I give yuh th' word to come out."

"Okay, Tonto," she agreed in hushed tones. "Anything you say."

Tonto went outside, closing the door after him.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Thieves Fall Out. . .

AS THE riders came nearer, Tonto began picking out those known to him. Sheriff Tom Harris and Deputy Hillman, were two. Tully Sampson, ramrod of the Circle Dot, a foreign owned spread half a dozen miles to the north, another. Two punchers from DeSpain's neighboring Slash Bar J—and DeSpain himself.

(Please continue on page 104)



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(Continued from page 102)

Without appearing at all concerned, Tonto backed slowly until he had the log walls of his cabin behind him. He lifted his sixguns from leather, allowing them to slide back lightly.

"Looks a heap like that second batch of big trouble I been expecting is now showing up," he grunted to himself. "DeSpain wouldn't be along without he thinks he's got a good card in th' hole. And—mebbe his ain't as good as th' one I've got."

The riders came on to the front of the cabin and pulled up.

"Howdy, Tonto," Sheriff Harris, a grizzled, skimpy man with a big reputation, greeted the horseman.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Tonto gave back.

"DeSpain, there," nodding towards the rancher-merchant, "has got a coupla riders in th' fog—so he says. Fellers that quit yuh yesterday, Tonto, an' hired out to him. Slat Blake an' Shorty Furgeson, they're named. Yuh happen to know anything about them jaspers?"

"I might," coldly.

"He knows a heap, Tom!" DeSpain declared, shoving his bronc forward.

"Yuh better keep that there skunk quiet, Sheriff," Tonto advised pointedly. "I warned him off my spread yesterday, and I'd be chousing him off now, only he come under yore pertection. Now—git this business done with, Sheriff. I ain't got no time fur fooling around!"

"Okay. Slat and Shorty hired to DeSpain early last night. They left town to ride out here and pick up their bedrolls and warbags, agreeing to show up on th' Slash Bar afore midnight. They ain't showed up until yet. Furthermore, they spilled it to DeSpain that yuh'd went on th' prod when they quit cold. Done a little sharp-shootin', they claims. Figgered yuh'd make 'em trouble, sometime or other. Now—coupla DeSpain's punchers, ridin' home from a dance afore midnight last night, heard a lotta gun-talk over this way about then. That's whut brung us out here, Tonto. Got anything on that?"

"Plenty. Them hombres rode off about five o'clock yesterday, and they took bedrolls and warbags along with 'em. Likewise, two-hundred-forty dollars, being their pay to date—"

"Hell!" DeSpain broke in. "Yuh re-

fused to pay them busters. They said so. Refused to pay an honest debt—"

Tonto took two steps away from the wall, his eyes cold and menacing. Sheriff Harris rasped:

"Keep outa this, DeSpain, else rattle yore hocks down th' trail. I'm doin' th' talkin'. Me an' Tonto. Go ahead, Tonto."

Without wasting a word, Tonto described accurately the happenings of the night just passed. All listened in silence until he had finished.

"Now—whut about them fellas in the root-cellar?" he asked.

"We'll ride 'em into town. Hook up yore buckboard, an' we'll git goin'."

Tonto presently wheeled his buckboard up before the root-cellar, got down and unlocked the door. Shorty Furgeson, pale, red-eyed and sheepish, came out first. Blake, bloody and patently in pain, followed. His eyes, finding DeSpain, registered a measure of relief.

"Ain't no fault of Harper's," he snarled viciously, "that I ain't bled to death. He jumped us up fur nothin' a-tall!"

"That's my bet, too, Harris!" DeSpain cut in harshly. "I can tell when a jasper is out and out lying—and that's what Harper is feeding yuh, Sheriff. A pack of lies!"

Tonto wasn't taking that. Before DeSpain could do more than snatch at his gun-butt, he was jerked from his kak and hurled with force to the ground. He completed his draw—and the toe of Tonto's boot sent the gun spinning a dozen yards away.

DeSpain bleated agonizedly, wringing his right hand on which two fingers had been broken. He got up quickly, reached inside his shirt for his hide-out gun—

Tonto's hard fist caught him smack on the nose, and an equally hard left to the chin sent DeSpain down again. He lay there, shouting for his two riders to side him. Then Sheriff Harris, anxiously eyeing Tonto's two guns which were now palmed and ready, took the play to himself.

"Put up them hoglaigs, Harper!" he snapped. "Yuh rannies sit tight—else I'll do some gunnin' on my own. Git up from there, DeSpain, an' try to act like a man. Yuh got whut was comin' to yuh. Best not to call a man a liar in Arizona, ner spit in his face. Yuh asks fur it if yuh do. Now," to Tonto, who had leathered his

guns, "yuh help load that corp onto th' buckboard, an' we'll rattle along."

Tonto and Tully Sampson loaded the body, covered it with a blanket, then helped the two wounded men into the back seat. Just then Deputy Hillman rode up.

"Fence is cut just like Tonto said it was," he reported. "Found whereat Tonto turned that hoss-herd last night. Looked th' ground over good. Picked up a coupla busted rifle ca'tridges, and I reckon them was th' ones from Bignmouth's gun. Found some forty-five empties, scattered about—and I reckon Tonto has told us the right of it, Tom. Shore do."

Sheriff Harris nodded agreement. "Aim to ride these hombies to town and jug 'em," he said. "Don't expect they'll stay jugged fur long, though, me knowin' whut Arizona stockmen does to hoss-thieves when they are ketched red-handed. I figger this pair was so ketched. I'll do my best to perect 'em—but I ain't guaranteein' my best will be good enough. Yuh drive, Hillman. We'll come along behind."

Shorty, having heard the sheriff's significant reference to the fate of horse-thieves in Arizona, now fixed agonized eyes on DeSpain. The latter, mounted again, looked down at him coldly. Shorty gulped, and bleated:

"DeSpain—yuh gotta help us fellers outten this! Yuh kain't leave us git hung thataway! Yuh kain't do that there to us!"

"Yuh jaspers ain't got any call on me," DeSpain told him with a shrug. "I hired yuh to ride fur me. That's all I know about this business—"

"Yuh lie, an' yuh knows it—" Shorty began, but broke off sharp when a smack to the mouth from Slat's Blake's free hand split his lips and loosened a few teeth in front.

"Shut yore trap, -yuh damned fool!" Blake snarled. "Any more outten yuh, an' I'll crack yore neck fur yuh!"

Deputy Hillman turned around in his seat. "Put a paw on Shorty again, Slat's," he said quietly, "and I'll bend a sixgun barrel over yore conk. Yuh savvy that, don't yuh?"

Without waiting for an answer, the deputy gathered the reins in hand and wheeled away towards Lodgepole.

"I'll follow yuh in, Sheriff," Tonto told Harris.

The sheriff merely nodded and rode off. When Tonto went into the cabin, Peaches was nowhere to be seen. He pushed open the door of the second room and found her.

She was cuddled up in a bunk—and sound asleep.

"Holy smoke!" he ejaculated under his breath. "I've heard about cold nerve before—but this here is the simon-pure article!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Trail of Trickery

TONTO and Peaches ground-hitched in front of the bank in Lodgepole near the noon hour that day. They were greeted affably by Old Man Ritchie, president of the bank, and, as Tonto had foreseen, there was no difficulty at all about arranging a loan.

"I know about those remounts, Harper," the banker told him. "Reckon twenty-five thousand in good horse flesh ought to carry a two-thousand dollar loan. It's dinner-time now. Come in at one o'clock and we'll get the business done."

Tonto was just one broad grin, and Peaches was happy too, as they entered the hotel dining-room, chose a table and ordered.

"Gosh, Peaches!" Tonto exclaimed, unable to contain his exuberance longer. "That takes a load off my mind! Sam gits his five-hundred. Yuh go back to Tucson, ridin' in style—and above all, them broncs eats sound grain and good hay plumb until they are turned over to the Government. And here I was thinking another big trouble was headed my way! Just shows whut fool noshuns a fella can git, 'specially when he's low in his mind already. Shore does!"

"Gee, Tonto—I'm happy too!" Peaches smiled at him. "Happy for Sam and his broken leg. And mighty happy for you, too—you high-chinned, old owlhoot you!"

Tonto let go of half a gasp—but bit it off. Someday when Sam Teale's leg was good as new, he'd give that hombra a fine working over for that dirty business. Peaches, he observed, was looking at him out of anxious eyes. She asked almost in a whisper:

"Did I say something awful again, Tonto—please?"

"Shucks, it don't amount to nothing," he reassured her. "Only, Peaches, don't ever call anybody else that—please!"

Sheriff Harris came to their table just then. Invited, he dragged out a chair and sat down. After he had ordered, he said:

"I figured Shorty would pop wide open. Tonto. Spill th' beans proper. DeSpain, I make no doubt, hired them three nogoods to rustle yore stock—an' proof of that would fix his clock fur him in these parts. Besides sending him up fur a stretch. This country would be a lot better to live in if he wasn't in it. But Shorty has froze tight. More scared of Slat's than he is of gettin' strung up. If he stays froze—well, DeSpain stays in th' clear. I'll hate that a heap—damn it all to hell! Beggin' yore pardon, miss," he apologized to Peaches.

"Tonto's thinking worse than that," she laughed. "Just hasn't got what it takes to open up with it, Sheriff. That's all!"

The staccato bark of a six-gun broke up the sheriff's merriment and wiped the grin off Tonto's lips. Both men tensed. The single report was followed almost instantly by half-a-dozen blasts. Leaving the girl where she sat, the men raced to the door and out into the street.

The street was deserted—except for a group of some three or four riders who were just then disappearing southwards in a fog of dust.

A wildly excited young woman ran from the bank half a block away. "Help!" she cried. "They robbed the bank—and shot Fred Buckley! Help! Get a doctor—quick!"

The sheriff and Tonto were entering the bank as she finished. Other citizens were hurrying up by then, most of them armed. Doc Bradley, bag in hand, rushed inside.

Buckley, the cashier, was lying on the floor back of the teller's window. His face was covered with blood—but the blood could not conceal a small hole between his eyes.

"Dead," Doc Bradley announced after a brief examination. "Died on his feet, no doubt. Anybody else hurt?"

The young woman bookkeeper answered in a strangled voice.

"No. We were alone in the bank. Dinner hour. Two men came in, stuck us up, looted the vault and counter-tills, putting all in a grain-sack. They started backing

out—and poor—poor Fred reached for the gun under his window. A tall man, carrying the sack in one hand and a gun in the other, shot him down. That's all I know about it!"

IT WAS enough. Enough, at least, for Tonto Bill Harper. Almost blindly, he made his way out of the bank. Peaches had joined the crowd before the door. He took her by an arm and walked her half a block down the street.

"We're blowed up higher'n hell, Peaches!" he gulped finally. "Bank robbers took all th' jack. Not a dollar left. We don't git that loan—and my broncs starves to death. I can almost count their pore ribs right now!"

"What—what are we going to do, Tonto?" Peaches quavered.

Tonto stopped in his tracks. He was thoughtful for a moment. Then: "I got an idea."

"Well, Tonto," said Peaches, her near panic vanishing, "this is a mighty good time to have an idea! And is it one that includes me—you old sidewinder?"

Tonto disregarded the offense, merely chalking it up against Sam Teale.

"It's like this," he explained, while his heart dropped towards the bottom of his stomach. "Yuh ain't got any money and I ain't either. Sam's got a broke laig. The ponies ain't got any feed, and I ain't got any credit. So—we got to sell. Can't have 'em starving—so we'll just hafta sacrifice 'em. Gawd knows I hate to do it, but there ain't any other way. Yuh come along with me."

Peaches slipped an arm in the crook of Tonto's, and went obediently with him toward DeSpain's general store. She didn't know that the tall puncher was right then hating himself with consuming wrath, but he was doing just that.

"—Wait until them ponies of yores set in nickerin', pawin' and beggin' for feed yuh ain't got and can't get—"

Well, damn it all, things wouldn't come to that pass, anyhow!

The sheriff and town marshal, heading a posse of twenty-odd, galloped past them and headed southwards. Passing through the dust cloud their going had raised, Tonto told the girl to wait under the wooden awning of the general store. He probably

THE BREAKING OF TONTO BILL

wouldn't be gone only a few minutes. Two minutes later he was back.

"Nothing doing," he said helplessly. "My idea blew up on me. DeSpain rode outa town two hours ago. So I reckon, Peaches, there ain't but one thing yuh can do. Ride out to th' ranch with me, and stay there until I can make a deal. So let's be ridin'."

Half an hour later, and after Tonto had spent his three dollars for grub to pack out, they rode off northwestward over the hot sands of the desert, heading towards Dusty Fork, and the horse ranch.

Two hours out, opposite where the dim trail skirted in toward the Lava Beds, Tonto saw something that caused him to pull up to a dead stop.

It really wasn't anything of importance. Just that some careless person had spilled perhaps a double handfull of speckled brown beans there in the sandy trail. And Pintos selling at five cents the pound!

"Almost one entire snack of beans," he allowed presently. "I reckon we might as well have 'em—"

"There's some more!" Peaches broke in, pointing.

Tonto looked off to the side of the trail where the lava beds sent up heat-waves to the sun, and saw a couple of brown beans glinting. Then, astonished, he looked farther and saw a couple more.

Without commenting, he rode onto the lava beds, and kept riding for a quarter-mile or so. Peaches followed.

More brown pintos. Every hundred or so feet he found two or more. Presently he drew up, and turned toward the girl a face she had not seen before. A grim, set-jawed face.

"I think I savvy," he said, his voice chilly. "Then pintos wasn't spilled in the trail accidental. They was put there. So the ones we been seeing lined out acrost the lava, Peaches, wasn't dropped accidental neither. Hell—if yuh wasn't with me, I'd—"

He broke off, seeing that he had brought a hurt look to the girl's face.

"If you don't want me with you, Tonto," she offered meekly. "I'll go back. I can follow the trail."

Not want her with him?

Tonto hadn't given it any thought be-



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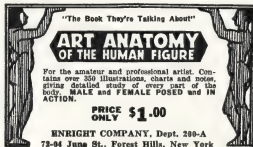
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fore, but now he suddenly felt a sort of all-goneness. An anticipatory all-goneness. Gosh! Of course he wanted her with him!

"Like hell yuh'll go back!" he covered up angrily. "C'mon. Back to the trail."

She followed obediently, and watched in silence while the lank puncher got down and carefully collected the double handful of beans from the sand. Furthermore, he walked onto the beds and picked up all the shiny little pintos which could be seen from where she sat. Then he returned, mounted, and set a stiff pace on down the trail.

ONE mile farther, Tonto pulled up. The lava had nearly petered out at that spot. He got down and carefully dumped a double handful of pintos at the right hand side of the trail. The trail to his own spread.

"Follow me," he bade Peaches, "and not too fast."

Taking her cue from the abrupt change in Tonto, who had gone as savage as the country around them, Peaches rode after him onto the blistering beds, and made no comment. She merely kept her eyes on him, and wondered what he was up to.

After so carefully picking up beans farther up the trail, he was now strewing them all over creation, or part of it at any rate, with equal care. He was dropping beans as he went along. It was hardly believable!

"Tonto," she ventured timidly after they had covered a mile, and the tall puncher had stopped to take a paper bag of beans out of his saddle-sack, "should you be wasting our food supply that way?"

"Yuh savvy jack-pot, don't yuh?"

"Sure. Something to do with poker, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Fellers sit around a table an' sweeten up a pot with jack. So'm I, Peaches—only this is a bean-pot I'm sweet-

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enin'. Just hush up now, an' don't talk."

Then, leading his bald-face gelding as before, he went right on across the gentle upslope of lava—scattering pintos behind him.

Two miles more up into the juniper-clad crests, and then his ranch-house abruptly revealed itself in a copse of pinyon and oak which skirted the clearing.

Tonto opened the door of the cabin, tossed his grub-sack inside, and said: "Peaches, we're home!"

He reached up, took her under her arms and swung her out of the saddle.

"Yuh go inside and make yoreself at home, while I corral the bronses," he ordered.

She went into the cabin and dropped wearily onto the first soap-box she came to. Soon Tonto came in.

"All right. Now what?" Peaches asked quietly.

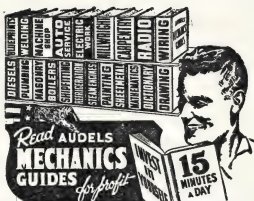
"I'll hand it to yuh for being a right sensible gal, Peaches," Tonto said admiringly, "besides being pretty as all gitout along with it. Swell combination, I'm telling yuh!"

"Thanks a heap—you mossy-horned old outlaw," she offered, using another phrase with which Sam had supplied her. "But tell me something that's got dew on it. For instance, what's it all about?"

Tonto was then occupied intently with a can of oil, a soft cloth—and his pair of six-guns. After he had cleaned and oiled the weapons, he saw fit to talk a little.

"We probably will be having company right soon," he told her. "But yuh ain't on the welcoming committee. Just me." He shoved cartridges into the cylinders of the six-guns, holstered them and continued. "Pretty soon yuh will go up into the scrub on the crest back of here, and stay there until I come and git yuh. If I don't come—well, yuh can ride to Lodgepole later and tell the sheriff about it. Reckon yuh better lope up into the scrub right now, Peaches," he ended.

"I won't!" she refused flatly. "I'm afraid of bugs and snakes, and—things that crawl around in trees and on the ground. So I will stay right here in this cabin. If you can protect yourself, you can protect me too. If you can't—well," with



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

a shrug of her shoulders, "I'd rather be man-bit than snake-bit, or bit by those horrible toads and bugs. So that settles it—"

She ceased abruptly. Tonto's head had come up and she saw his spinal column stiffen. He closed the door quickly and laid a wooden bar across it.

"Yuh little fool!" he snarled, turning blazing eyes upon her. "Yuh got to take it now, whether or not yuh want to! Yuh wouldn't take to the timber— But, hell, what's the use? I just can't get mad at yuh good and proper. But for the love of Mike, don't come down until yuh know it's safe to!"

And Peaches, before she could even protest, was seized in Tonto's bony hands and literally tossed through an open manhole into the loft above. She fell on the loose boards with a thud—and thought it best to stay there.

"Lissen, Peaches!" he called after her, and thrust the butt of a rifle through the manhole. "Take this gun. When yuh hear me bawl out again, poke the barrel through a crack and try to hold it steady on some special man that's amongst them now a-coming. Don't yuh let out a squeak. Just wiggle the gun-barrel to attract attention, and let 'em think there's a he-man holding the iron on'em. Now don't fail me in no particular!"

PEACHES certainly didn't intend to fail Tonto. She crawled forward to the front peak of the loft, dragging the rifle after her. She saw a long slit between two logs, and peered out through it.

Three men, riding single-file, were then entering the far side of the clearing. Peaches saw at a glance that they were saddle-weary and their broncs badly blown. One of the men had a meal-sack across the front of his saddle, its contents balanced over his bronc's withers.

All three riders were heavily armed.

"Hello there, Jack!" the meal-sacker called, bringing his bronc to a halt about ten feet from the door. "Show yoreself, pardner! We follered yore bean-trail like directions—and now we crave to eat some!"

Where was Tonto, Peaches wondered wildly. The other two riders had stopped back of the leader, and were waiting.

THE BREAKING OF TONTO BILL

"Go high with 'em, all you bullies!"

Tonto made his whereabouts known right at that instant. As best Peaches could tell, he was back of a big boulder out in the clearing—at least she saw the glint of a gun-barrel lying along the top of one.

She remembered instructions then, and poked the barrel of the rifle through the slit between the logs. She made plenty noise doing it, so as to attract attention. She succeeded. The three men, stiff as icicles at sound of Tonto's command, lifted their glance to the threatening rifle-barrel, and Peaches could see from where she was how completely flabbergasted they were.

"Hold that rifle tight on the one sitting in the lead, Sam, old pard!" Tonto called from back of the boulder. "If he bats even one eye, let him have plenty!"

Peaches wiggled the barrel understandingly, then held it steady on the meal-sacker.

Tonto sauntered with seeming casualness from behind the boulder. He had both of his six-shooters in his hands, and he was covering the two men back of the leader.

"Rest yore saddles, hombres!" he commanded, stopping where he could cover all three. "Do it with yore paws held high!"

Just then Peaches wiggled the rifle-barrel again, and that seemed to decide the issue. The bandits hit the dirt, hands high, and on Tonto's side of the broncs.

When he had taken away their weapons, Tonto herded them inside, lined them up flat on the floor and used a bunch of tie-ropes on them in a highly professional manner. Then he called out to Peaches:

"Yuh can come down now. All jake down here."

The girl descended the ladder and stood looking with approval at the job Tonto had done, happily conscious of the fact that she had had a part in it.

An amazed bandit bleated, staring at her sheepishly: "Is that Sam?"

The crash of breaking brush, the clatter of hoofs, drowned the comments of the two others. Tonto was outside in a flash. The girl ran to the doorway and peered out.

A sorrel bronc, carrying a heavy-set man with long black mustaches, came to a sliding stop in the clearing. The rider was reaching for a gun with his left hand.

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"Sit tight, DeSpain!" Tonto warned brittlely. "Yuh've done just what I figured yuh would. Yuh tumbled to the fact that I'd switched them beans from the trail yuh marked to yore spread and laid a trail to mine. Easy to figger out, when them imported bandits, all strangers hereabouts and brought in by yuh to pull that bank job, failed to show up. They won't show up. I've got 'em tied up inside. Git down, DeSpain, and join yore side-kicks—"

DeSpain, who had appeared to be frozen by the surprise of Tonto's revelations, came out of it. He snapped erect, and his six-gun swivelled up.

Tonto's draw was so lightning fast no eye could have followed through. His gun blasted once—

DeSpain, drilled between the eyes, pitched out of his saddle and was dead be-

fore he sprawled on the ground. . . .

At ten o'clock that night, a blond girl came out of the depot at Lodgepole. She had a telegraph sheet in a hand, and stopped where the agent's light streamed through a window. A tall puncher came out of the shadows and joined her. He was looking pretty much down in his mind.

Tonto Harper was realizing just then that he had been absolutely right about that second batch of trouble. That double measure of big trouble coming his way. It was Peaches. Yeah, no more or less. Just a few hours and she'd be on a train for Tucson—and that would be that. And Tonto knew blamed well that her going would trouble him more and make him far lower in his mind than he'd ever been before in the twenty-five years of his life.

Yeah, Peaches had all along been that



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THE BREAKING OF TONTO BILL

other trouble which threatened him!

He took the message from her mechanically. He wasn't really interested.

"It's to Sam," she told him. "I thought you should read it before I send it off."

Tonto held the sheet in the shaft of light. It read:

TONTO CAPTURED SOME BANK
ROBBERS FOR TWENTY FIVE HUN-
DRED DOLLARS REWARD STOP HAS
SPLIT IT THREE WAYS STOP SEND-
ING YOUR CUT TOMORROW STOP
NOT RETURNING TUCSON STOP
STAYING TO HELP TONTO TAKE
CARE PONIES STOP IF HE WILL
HAVE ME STOP LOVE STOP

Tonto gasped, and felt a rush of blood to his head when he read the final lines of the message.

"Yuh don't really mean it, Peaches—do yuh?" he managed.

"Of course I do, Tonto!" Peaches exclaimed, when he let her get her breath again. "You brush-poppin', old maverick you," she added happily, thus exhausting her vocabulary of cow-country terms of endearment.

THE END

GUN WAIF OF THE GOLD STORM

(Continued from page 82)

The sheriff's words seemed to infuriate Killen. Pierce saw the man's face twist, and he flung himself sidewise toward the corner of the shed where horses were probably tethered. Jack Madsen moved beside him. Their move, Pierce saw, had caught most of the prospectors by surprise, and he was grimly glad that he had unthonged his riata. It was ready in his hand now. Twice about his head he twirled it, and then the loop flicked with lazy speed above startled Willow Creek men. Plaited leather settled over the heads of Killen and Madsen.

"Thar's our meat, boys!" the loud prospector yelled, "Roped, and ready to hang!"

"No!" Pierce dropped the word coldly from his lips. "Not yet. They're going back to Pioneer to pay for the start of their game two years ago when five wild kids died. They're going to Deer Lodge and pay by livin', which is sometimes a heap sight worse than hanging!"

THE END



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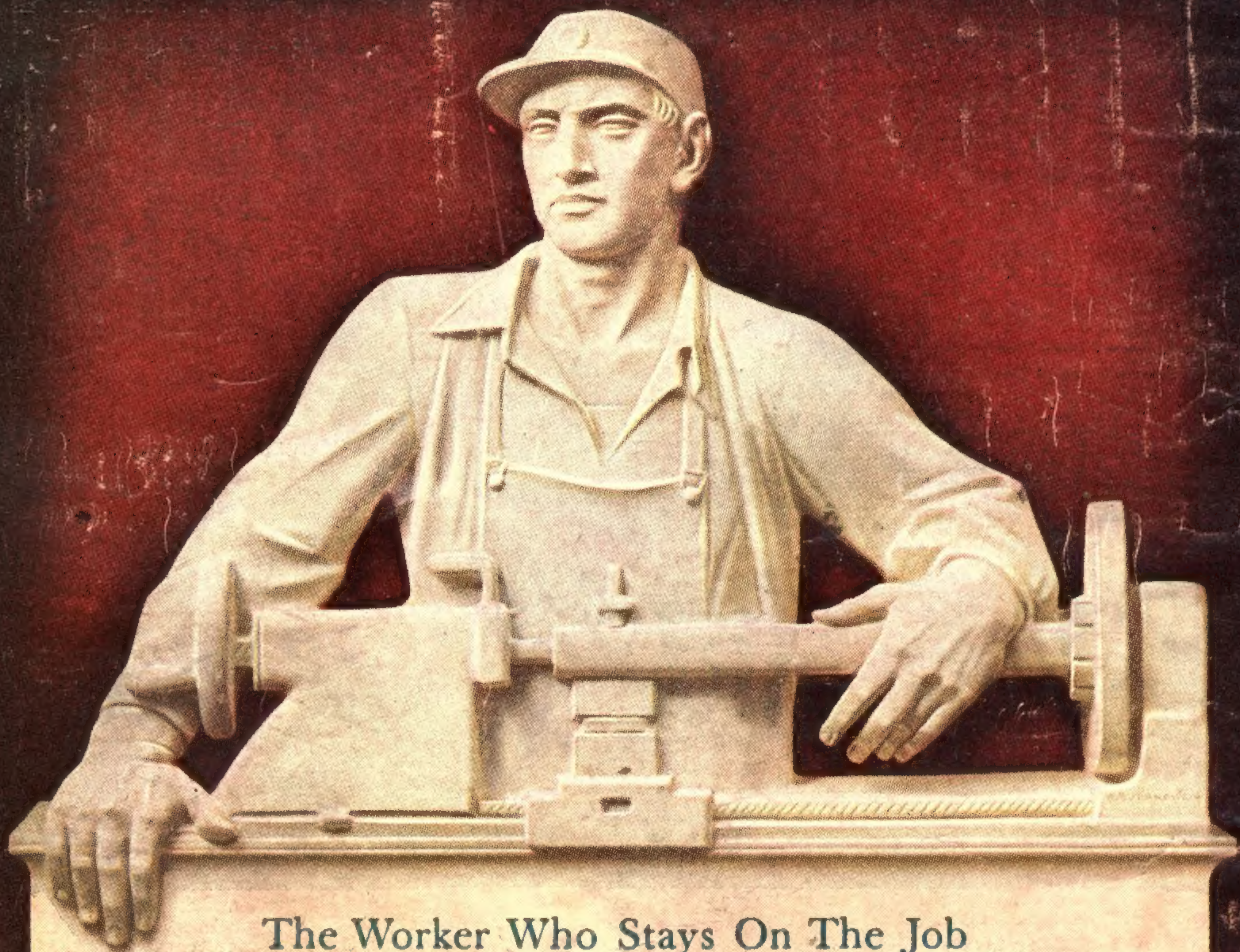
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